

Red Red Blood Chapter 1

We met at the Mid-Winter Charity Ball, held to raise funds for a new research lab to be built later in the spring. It would be used to find cures for blood-related diseases and disorders.

He was dressed entirely in black, except for his crisp white tailored shirt. His polished gold cufflinks reflected the light from the overhead chandelier, almost making them glitter. His midnight black hair was short, streaked with silver at his temples, but long enough to be combed back from his face. His smile lit up the room as he walked towards me and I felt like a shy teenager being greeted at the door for her very first date. His voice was dark and smooth, reminding me of bittersweet chocolate. “ I’m Count Marcus of Fredericksburg. ” He captured my hand to kiss in greeting and I noticed the ring he wore on the middle finger of his left hand was a square-cut black onyx with diamonds around the outer edge and blood-red rubies in the center, marking out the letter ‘M’.

“ You were the only person I noticed from across the room, an enchanting vision dressed from head to toe in red, my favorite color. I knew I had to meet you. ”

The chill of his mouth came into contact with the back of my hand and cold shivers ran down my spine, spreading rapidly over the rest of my body. I tried to pull away, but he raised his head and locked his dark, piercing eyes to mine, lifting the very thoughts from my soul.

I listened with pleasure as the band played my favorite song, ‘Lady in Red.’ Marcus asked me to dance, knowing full well I wouldn’t refuse. Our bodies swayed so close I heard his heart beat in staccato blips and recognized the intoxicating scent of his cologne. I glanced up and saw the sad expression in his gaze. “ Your smile lights up this dull ballroom with its brightness! ” His voice dripped ice so cold it sent my temperature rising to the boiling point. “ You and your exquisite red silk gown suit this song, ” he murmured against my hair.

I’d seen this particular dress in the storefront window of an exclusive designer shop, earlier Saturday afternoon. It screamed out my name in red-hot chili pepper coloring and I dashed inside, impulsively telling the clerk I had to try on that particular gown. It clung to my body like a second skin,

simple in style, but revealing enough to make me feel sensuous and alluring. A driving force surged through me and I bought it on the spot, not considering that it would cost me well over a month's salary. I drove home in haste, wanting to admire it again, but it hung in the back of my car, encased in its own heavy-duty plastic designer bag.

I rushed to my door, unlocked it and ran up stairs, getting to my bedroom in record time. I stripped off my clothes and tried on my dress once more. It fit me perfectly and I purred in delight! The scooped neckline showed off just enough cleavage to make me feel enticing and desirable. The empire waist allowed the skirt front to billow right above my knees, while the back dropped in swirling waves to mid-calf. I stared at a reflection I didn't recognize, feeling like an imperial queen.

I slipped my crimson high heels on over flesh-toned stockings and grabbed my matching wallet purse off the nightstand. I flew downstairs and out the door, then hopped into my '97 emerald green Mustang and drove like a she-devil to get to the Charity Ball on time!

As we danced, I was mesmerized by his presence, floating in the clouds, my feet never touching the ground. When the music stopped, minutes or hours could have slipped by. Scores of conflicting emotions enveloped me and Marcus whispered in my ear, "Would you enjoy strolling through the Rose Garden with me, My Dear Nancy?"

I searched my memory but didn't recall telling him my name when we met. I willingly accepted his offer and we walked leisurely into another world, where the scent of a thousand roses filled the air. The gardens were enclosed in a climate-controlled area, allowing them to bloom year round. He tenderly held my hand, and I experienced what it felt like to be a giddy teenager again. I wanted this night, above any other night in my life, to be perfect, needing Marcus to see me as his equal in every possible way.

We wound our way through the many paths and he told me about his early life in Fredericksburg. "My Father was the original Count of Fredericksburg and had untold wealth, handed down from generation to generation. Gold, silver, jewels, and property came his way by conquering nearby kingdoms. My Mother was named Desiree', a name that befit her nature. She was the most beautiful and desirable woman in the entire country. Her loveliness was breathtaking! She had black curling hair, deep lavender eyes and a

lilting voice that dripped with honey. ” Marcus looked intently at me. “ Her family had riches and power beyond measure and it was love at first sight for both of them. My father’s dark eyes and bold manner won my mother’s heart and they married one month to the day after they met. ” He sighed deeply. “ My mother wasn’t a strong woman and she died while giving birth to me; my life began and hers ended. ” Tears glistened in his eyes.

“ My Father never recovered from that day; his heart was broken and he grew steadily weaker as the years passed by. On my sixteenth birthday he left this earth to be with my Mother, the love of his life. I inherited his title, Count of Fredericksburg and all the responsibilities that go with it. I’ve invested my money wisely, have no financial worries and do as I please, traveling the world over, contributing to a vast assortment of charitable organizations. I’ve seen exotic places and met many lovely women on my journeys, but the ultimate pleasure in my life so far has been meeting you. ” He stopped walking and turned to face me directly. “ Your resemblance to my Mother is very remarkable; she adored red and I see you do as well. ” He picked up on my apprehensions. “ Please tell me about yourself. ”

“ I grew up in an orphanage. ” My nerves made me tremble.

“ Don’t ever be afraid to tell me anything and everything, because I really want to know. ” His tone was gentle and set me at ease.

“ When I graduated from high school, I received a full scholarship to a prestigious all girls’ college and majored in marketing and accounting. I’ve worked for David Winslow as his executive assistant for the past year and in fact, I helped him plan and arrange the Charity Ball. ”

“ And a splendid job you’ve done, My Dear. Do you have a husband or boyfriend perhaps? ”

“ No family, no husband, and definitely no boyfriend. ” I blushed in embarrassment. “ The last boyfriend I had dumped me for my best friend. He told me it was because I wanted to be sure of my feelings before I committed myself to being physically intimate with a man. Now it’s my job and me. ” Had I told him too much about my life?

“ To keep yourself pure until your innermost feelings are truly discovered is to be commended. You’re a very rare and delicate person, Nancy. Would

you consider being my ‘Lady in Red?’ ” He bent his head, his chilled lips colder than ice as he brushed my cheek, but his mouth left a wake of burning sensations on my skin.

“ There’s no need to answer me now. ” He spoke so quietly I almost didn’t catch his words, but their softness imprinted themselves in my soul and I knew we’d be together for eternity and beyond.

“ Yes, Marcus. All the time in the world. ” Had we walked for miles and miles or was it only a few feet? It was past midnight when we arrived back at the Charity Ball. I was the luckiest girl in the world to have a man like Marcus take an interest in me, causing my heart to sing a brand new song. My greatest desire was to become his ‘Lady in Red.’ “ Marcus... ”

He put a finger to my lips. “ I have business matters to attend to, but I want to see you tonight, ” he demanded. “ I’ll have Gustav, my driver, call for you at 7 pm sharp! ” He turned on his heel and as he strode out of sight, I realized I missed him already.

I went to the ladies room to freshen up and stopped inside the door when I heard two of my co-workers gossiping. One of them said, “ I don’t know what Count Marcus sees in her. Why, she’s as plain as white bread! ” They laughed in derision. “ Marcus is so handsome he could have any woman at this Ball or in the entire world. ”

The other girl said, “ Maybe he felt sorry for her. I’ll bet Mr. Winslow made him an offer he couldn’t very well refuse, so he pretended to take an interest in Nancy as part of a lucrative business deal. ”

As quietly as possible, I backed out of the powder room, not wanting them to know I’d overheard their conversation. Scalding tears flowed from my eyes, falling faster and faster down my cheeks. Sickness hit the pit of my stomach and I ran out of the building to the East Wing balcony. In the darkness a poem came to mind...

Speak To Me

Speak to me no more of love and romance
They only serve to bring pain and bitterness
It only goes along with love is blind
And it was for me, love was so unkind

My hurting heart now has a gaping wound
There's nothing left, no joy is found
Just my broken heart, where your love used to be
I thought your heart only belonged to me

No more can I give, no love is received
Too much in your deceitful love, I believed
Speak to me no more of love and romance
I can only feel the pain and bitterness

After a short while I calmed down, giving myself another pep talk. " Girlfriend, get a grip on yourself and face the facts. You're just a fool to think that Count Marcus would have any interest in a 'Plain Jane,' because that's exactly what you are. His driver will probably be a no show as well. " The further away Marcus was, the less influence he seemed to have. Little did I realize that this would be my one and only chance to escape with my life still intact. It started to rain, the drops becoming bigger and heavier, pelting my skin and making me hurt. Thunder rumbled across the pitch-black background of the starless night and all the streetlights in the immediate vicinity were knocked out. Streaks of lightning illuminated the few cars left in the parking lot below, so I turned around to go back inside and was startled by a figure standing close behind me. My heart did flip-flops and I almost fainted. " Mark, you certainly gave me a fright! "

Mark Patterson was my only real friend and had always been there for me. " What's wrong, Nancy? I saw you crying earlier, but didn't want to intrude on your privacy. " I shivered. He pulled off his dinner jacket and placed it around my shoulders, his warmth spreading throughout my body. I turned to face him as tears pooled in my eyes again.

" Mark, I met a wonderful man tonight, but I get the feeling he's just toying with my emotions, not meaning a blessed word he said. "

" What did he say that upset you? " Mark questioned.

" That I reminded him of his Mother, the beautiful Countess Desiree'. He said that meeting me was one of the greatest pleasures of his life and he wants to see me later on this evening. "

“ What gives you the impression he doesn’t like you or doesn’t wish to see you tonight? In my judgment, any man would be a fool if he didn’t want to see or be with you at any given time. I mean that from the bottom of my heart. ” I leaned into Mark’s strong embrace, feeling peaceful and safe.

“ You have no idea how much your words mean to me, Mark. ”

We walked through the double French doors into the darkened ballroom. I glanced at my Indiglow watch dial; the Charity Ball had been over with hours ago. Our footsteps echoed down the dimly lit hallway, leading us to the front entrance.

We passed a floor length gilded mirror and I gasped at my dreadful reflection! My hair was a wet tangled mess and my smudged mascara left me looking like a prizefighter who’d just lost the title match to the underdog. We both burst out laughing. “ Guess what? ” Mark said. “ Don’t get me wrong, but you remind me of the song ‘My Funny Valentine,’ red and sweet like a candy heart. ” The rain had stopped and the air smelled fresh and clean as he walked me to my car. He bent his head close to my ear. “ I never want you to be sad, only happy. ”

Driving home in the swirling fog, I decided not to worry about Marcus or the ladies room incident. Turning on Foxglove Lane, I arrived at my condo and parked inside the garage; the previous owner had died under mysterious circumstances and since it had remained on the market for two years, I got it at a rock-bottom price. Selma, my black Persian cat with the yellow-green eyes met me at the kitchen door and purred loudly as she rubbed against my legs. “ Are you hungry, my sweet baby? ” She lapped up the milk in her bowl, then followed me upstairs to my bedroom.

I stopped in front of the hallway mirror; my beautiful dress sported white streaks where the red dye had washed away and my soggy shoes squished, leaving wet spots on the beige carpet. I removed my dress, glanced down and observed a red mark imprinted on my left breast shaped in the letter ‘M.’ I unhooked my lacy red pushup bra and removed my silky red panties, but saw no more traces of the dye on my body.

I turned on the hot water, adjusted the temperature and stepped into the

shower. The gushing spray relaxed me and my mind wandered off into left field. “ I need a man who can and will take full possession of my heart and soul, being with me throughout eternity. ” I rolled my eyes and finished washing, then climbed out of the tub. I toweled dry, gazing at the mark on my breast; I’d scrubbed and scrubbed, but the ‘M’ had become more pronounced. I put some soothing lotion on it, then crawled into bed and fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

I woke up at 9 am with a terrible migraine, hoping a caffeine fix would cure it. A voice inside my mind spoke from out of the blue. “ Dried willow bark tea will cure your headache and take care of the knots in your stomach. ” I didn’t question the hows and whys, but found a jar of the herbal tea in the cupboard and made myself a cup.

By the time I sat down to read my horoscope in the morning paper, I felt a hundred times better. Sagittarius: ‘You’re in for a major surprise today. Will the omens be good or bad? Only time will tell!’ I groaned and grimaced. The only surprises I ever received were of the unpleasant variety.

Back in my bedroom I shed my nightgown, but couldn’t believe my eyes. The letter ‘M’ was so red it appeared as if a surgeon had removed the outer layer of skin, leaving muscle and blood exposed. “ Maybe a reaction to the willow bark, ” I thought.

I pulled on a white t-shirt, grey sweat pants, and a red jacket, then laced my running shoes and headed to the park. The air was fresh and clean, cool and invigorating. The fragrance of pine trees and bayberry bushes reached my nostrils and I breathed deeply, letting their essence soothe me. There were only a few people out on the path around the lake. Ducks and geese flew low, creating a picture perfect setting as I strolled along the dirt track. Alarm signals went off when a black limo followed me on the street that paralleled the path. Adrenaline surged through my system and my heart thumped a thousand beats per second just before the driver rolled down his window and shouted,

“ Wait up there! It’s me, Gustav, Count Marcus’s driver. ” He motioned me over and I recognized his shock of white hair and his heavy German accent. “ The Count requests the pleasure of your company tonight and I’ve been instructed to pick you up at 7 pm sharp! ” He handed me a satiny-white oblong box, tied with a huge red velvet bow. “ Count Marcus asks that you wear what’s inside for this evening’s festivities. ” He rushed off, dust

blowing and tires screeching.

The burdens of my heart and soul were lifted and I raced home at breakneck speed. I took the stairs two at a time and placed the box on my bed, untied the bow, and stripped off the wrapping paper! Underneath red opaque tissue was the most feminine ball gown I'd ever laid eyes on. The lacy white taffeta dress had a heart-shaped bodice lined in red velvet. The material glimmered and sheened in the light as I spun round and round. The doorbell rang and I nearly jumped out of my skin, then rushed downstairs to see who was calling on me.

Being wary of strangers, I peeked through the gauzy window curtain at two ladies who'd positioned themselves on my porch. They looked harmless enough, so I opened the door to them. They both had jet-black hair and were stylishly dressed in current fashions. The lady with the Ray bans spoke up. " We were instructed to come here this afternoon and help you with your hair and makeup, taking extra care that your new ball gown fits perfectly. Count Marcus of Fredericksburg is having an intimate dinner party tonight and you're to be his guest of honor. "

I glanced at my watch, amazed at how fast the morning had flown. " Marcus is doing something this special for me? " A dazed look crossed my face. " Do come in, Ladies. "

They walked right on past as if they were the owners, and I was just another visitor. The woman with the sunglasses said, " My name is Valera Jesamain. My daughter Cecelia and I've worked many years for Count Marcus. " They appeared close enough in age to pass for sisters, rather than mother and daughter. " I'm going to style your hair and CeCe will polish and buff your nails. Why don't you go take a shower and we'll set everything up for you in your bedroom. " Valera's voice was smooth and cultured with a slight French accent.

I went to the bathroom and removed my sweaty clothes, then climbed into the tub. The hot water washed away the dirt from my body, but the mark glowed fiercely, pulsing in time with my heartbeat.

I finished and walked into the bedroom. Valera said, " Remove your towel, please. "

Embarrassed, I stood before her in all my naked glory. “ I’ve never had anyone help me dress before. ”

She handed me new silk and lace underwear; a glacier white strapless push-up bra and matching panties. She pointed to the ‘M.’ “ I have a remedy for this small problem! ” She reached into a bag and lifted out three jars, then made an herb poultice and applied it to the mark. “ The dried burdock will help the swelling go down, the dried chickweed will draw out any infection, and the dried marigold petals will tone down the redness. Leave the preparation on for an hour and then we’ll use body make-up to cover any red that remains. ”

“ Can you really do that? ” I asked gratefully.

“ Yes; both CeCe and I are experts in this field. ” They left my room and I fell asleep to dreams of dancing with Marcus at the Charity Ball. Valera quietly roused me from my reverie and looked pleased as punch when she removed the poultice from my breast.

The mark was so faint I could barely see it and I sighed in relief, then gave Valera a quick hug. “ You don’t know what this means to me, Valera. ”

“ I think I do, Nancy. ” She handed me a cup of steaming liquid after she blended a dab of toner on the mark. “ I was named after the Valerian root that this tea is made from. Drink it to calm and compose yourself for this evening’s party. ”

I sipped while CeCe buffed and filed my nails. She glanced briefly at all the different colors of polish, then finally settled on one. “ Ah, this one will do quite nicely. ” Her smile was warm, but changed into a slightly evil grin as she applied the base coat.

“ Isn’t this way too bright? ” I asked.

“ I think not! ” She laughed out loud. “ I guarantee this Wicked Red will match the sash that goes with your gown. ” In the palm of her hand was a mid-sized red jewelry box. “ It’ll also match this present from the Count. ”

I removed the lid and gasped! Glowing red in the afternoon sunlight was a spectacular ruby necklace, its heart-shaped pendant encrusted with tiny

diamonds. Lying next to it on the white satin lining was a pair of matching heart-shaped ruby earrings.

While my fingernails dried, CeCe gave me a pedicure, painting each toenail in Wicked Red, then she showed me the pair of open-toed, white Italian leather shoes that Marcus had given me to wear. “ My two favorite colors, ” she giggled.

“ White and red; virginal, but passionate. ”

Valera fussed with my hair. “ We’ll keep it simple, pulling it back and letting Countess Desiree’s gold and ruby tiara hold your dark curly tresses in place. ” I felt honored that Marcus wanted me to wear an adornment that had belonged to his mother. I stepped into the magnificent taffeta dress and CeCe tied the red velvet sash behind me. She clasped the ruby necklace around my neck and put the earrings in my earlobes. They glowed as red as the blood which flowed steadily in my veins.

I walked over to the full-length mirror and the image that stared back was a glorious sight to behold. “ Oh, Miss Nancy, you could pass for Countess Desiree’! ” CeCe fairly shouted with joy.

Valera turned me this way and that. “ Yes, Count Marcus will be utterly amazed and delighted with your lovely vision. Now for the finishing touch; this very special lipstick imported all the way from Fredericksburg. ” As its crimson warmth came in contact with my mouth, a strange voice whispered, “ ‘My Queen of the Night.’ ”

A hard rapping at the door startled me and CeCe took it upon herself to rush past and answer it. Gustav stood there, hat in hand, his voice filled with reverence and awe. “ Countess Desiree’, it’s been an eternity since I’ve been in your presence; you’re more beautiful than ever. ” He immediately realized his mistake and bowed his head. “ I’m very sorry, but your appearance reminds me of the Countess before she left. Please forgive me? ”

“ Of course, Gustav, ” I told him kindly.

He pulled himself together rather quickly. “ Miss Nancy, it’s time to go. Count Marcus won’t appreciate me dropping you off any later than 8 pm. ”

Being pampered like royalty was definitely to my liking and I walked

regally to the limo, knowing I ruled the world as Queen. Gustav opened the door; I climbed in and was whisked away, like Cinderella to the Ball. The cityscape gave way to familiar countryside for a short period of time, but I was soon lost. Gustav turned right onto a gravel road that twisted through dark green pine and fir trees. Traveling up the winding hill, magic crackled in the air; the road ended on an outcropping of rock and a massive castle came into view. “ Where are we, Gustav? ”

“ This is Princess Sheridan’s Home. Count Marcus is visiting her while he’s on his business trip to the States and she’s been kind enough to offer him the premises for his dinner party tonight. ”

The castle was huge; greystone with rounded turrets, each individual one having red and white flags flying in the stiff breeze. “ Gustav, is this a fairytale castle where the prince and princess live happily ever after? ”

He laughed heartily. “ I failed to mention that it’s an exact replica of the Count’s Castle in Fredericksburg and that Princess Sheridan and the Count are related. ”

“ Related in what way? ” I was puzzled and my nerves were on edge after that comment.

“ It’s not what you think, Miss Nancy; they are sister and brother. ” I let out a huge sigh of relief and smiled within my heart.

It was cool and fragrant as I emerged from the limo and I pictured Prince Charming and Cinderella living in this cloudland castle. We walked to the front entrance and Gustav banged a circular brass knocker on the heavy wooden door. “ Good evening. ” Her voice was light and airy and she reminded me of an angel with her short blond hair and dark brown eyes.

The foyer was small and had framed paintings on both walls. Each of the four pictures showed a different view of the castle from the air. The building sat like a jewel, nestled amongst the trees; grey, with glimpses of red and white, surrounded by various shades of green.

“ Gustav, I thought you said that Marcus and Sheridan were brother and sister. They certainly don’t resemble each other, ” I whispered.

Sheridan overheard me. “ Marcus and I are stepbrother and sister. My mother married the Count’s father soon after his first wife died. ” Her eyes saddened. “ He thought Marcus needed a feminine touch, but the poor man never got over Desiree’s death. ” She brightened up a bit. “ I want to welcome you to my humble home, Casa Sheridan. My friends call me Sher and I’d be honored if you would also, Nancy. ”

My frazzled nerves calmed down and I felt right at home. “ Follow me to the sitting room and I’ll introduce you to everyone. ” We walked down a long hallway past the library, the music room, and several other rooms that had been closed off. Sher said, “ I help Marcus manage the winery at Fredericksburg and I’ll be going back in two weeks to oversee the grape planting. My servants are closing the castle till my return in mid-October. ”

I hoped Marcus would be there, but saw no familiar faces in the crowd. My heart pounded with anxiety when all eyes turned their attention in my direction. They whispered and pointed their fingers at me. “ She’s the spitting image of Countess Desiree’. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear it was her. ” They all welcomed me with open arms and kisses on the cheek.

On silent feet, Marcus appeared at my side. “ My lovely Nancy, have you been introduced to everyone here? ”

“ Yes, I have. ” His frosty lips kissed the back of my hand and shivers of delighted dread slid down my spine.

“ Then may I have this first dance with you? ” Marcus led me into the Ballroom, gathered my hand in his, and guided me across the floor. The musicians played the Viennese Waltz and we flowed to the sound of the string quartet. Time stood still; our heartbeats filled the ballroom as the music faded into the distance.

Flickering candlelight brightened the room; everyone had disappeared except for the two of us. Marcus placed a crystal goblet of black liquid in my hand. “ Sip this cordial to cool you down. ” He smiled with no warmth, exposing his pearly white teeth. “ Let me explain the superstition behind this blackberry wine. In England, the legend goes that there are correct times for picking blackberries. When the devil fell from heaven, he landed on a blackberry bush, and any blackberries picked after Michaelmas (September 29th) will have the devil’s spittle on them. ” He leered at me, his voice filled

with arrogance. “ Guess when the berries were picked for this wine you’re drinking? ”

I looked at him uncertainly. “ After Michaelmas? ”

“ Of course, my Dear. ” He snickered. “ Drink up, then we’ll dance the night away. ”

The wine was sweet, cooling my dry throat, but warming on the way down. Marcus and I glided to the Viennese Waltz again, our bodies a romantic dance of love in motion. We were two shadows, spinning and whirling around the room, a musicale fantasy come true.

The violins and cellos dispelled the darkness as the quartet repeated the same strains from the beginning. I glanced around and saw couples dressed in 18th century finery. Was I hallucinating? I kept blinking my eyes, but the scene remained the same. Everyone clapped then began chattering as the music stopped. “ Marcus? What in heaven’s name is going on? ” Our minds linked and I heard his unspoken words.

Birth of Desiree’

Sipping on the delicious blackberry wine that he offered me
Made me smile in blessed relief
The taste was fruity sweet
As it cooled my parched mouth and throat

I exhaled a laugh while a velvet smooth sensation
This first privilege of feeling, a sense of elation
Euphoria surrounded me like a cloak
As the heady intoxication consumed me with bliss
My fantasies were occupied
By having his lips taste of mine with his kiss

When I had my fill, my eyes held a shine
The Count mentioned the superstition
The Legend behind the wine
“ In English folklore there are correct times for berry picking,
That all good women and men would apply
When Satan himself, was kicked out of Heaven

Shivering, all the children do speak with conviction
Any berries picked after Michaelmas (September 29)
Will have the Devil's spittle on them ”

His grin was shaped in Evil
His fangs glistening in the short-lived light
His voice dripping sarcasm
Freezing in its deathly chill

He said, “ My Dear, this wine that you drank
Will lead you to temptation, to places dark and dank
The fermented berries were picked after Michaelmas
They were cold with frost, glazed with crystaled ice ”

My thoughts flash red, with pulsing blood now are filled
There's a pricking at my neck; he claims his marriage stake
His name for me is Desiree', his heart's desire
No one left to hear my nightshade cries, burned with fire
T'is the everlasting death of me, cards of Life no longer in the deck
Desiree's birth this day he makes

Chapter 2

“ My beautiful Desiree', have you forgotten so soon? ” Marcus was so handsome, so regal; like a king amongst his loyal subjects. “ Don't you remember being married to me this very afternoon? You were the loveliest bride Fredericksburg ever witnessed. We're at our wedding reception, surrounded by family, friends, and guests. ” Instruments were being fine-tuned. “ I've instructed the musicians to play your favorite song, ‘The Viennese Waltz.’ This first dance belongs to us alone. ”

Marcus gathered my hand in his as he waltzed me across the floor. More of my memories came flooding back as we continued dancing. My family had all but disowned me and I was shipped off to a private girl's school in Europe. Circumstances changed and my Uncle Joshua properly introduced me to Marcus in the autumn of 1875; he'd just graduated from the University Of Fredericksburg and was to be my tutor. He was dashing and debonair, having his pick of any girl in the world, but he chose me. There weren't any serious suitors before Marcus, but I'd made a good friend

aboard my uncle's clipper ship, Goddess of the Sea; his name was Phillippe and although I was fond of him, I could never love him in the same way I loved Marcus. I never told my Father or my sister, Bethanie of our engagement or marriage, because I felt it was none of their concern and Marcus agreed.

I was happy with Marcus. He swept me off my feet in a whirlwind romance and we married one month to the day after we met; the very day that I turned 18, October 17th. It was the largest wedding that Fredericksburg had ever witnessed and Marcus spared no expense. I had no one close by to invite, but all of his friends and relatives were in attendance. He was dressed in a black mourning coat and black trousers, while I wore a wedding dress made especially for me in Paris; white satin overlaid with white lace and seed pearls sewn in rosette patterns on the bodice. My sheer lace veil was imported from Italy and the bridal bouquet held wine red roses and white baby's breath to symbolize passion and purity.

Marcus stood at the altar with an everlasting smile on his face and in his heart, waiting to hear the words, " I do, " fall from my virgin lips. I remembered this part of Heaven on earth; my birthday and wedding day combined. " I love you Marcus, " I whispered as tears of joy welled in my eyes. " You've made me the happiest woman in the world. "

Marcus kissed me soundly on my mouth, in full view of all the invited guests who'd become witnesses to the biggest surprise Fredericksburg had ever seen.

" Now is the first time for us to dance as man and wife. " Marcus led me into the Grand Ballroom and the string quartet played 'The Viennese Waltz.' With my hand in his, time drifted away. He guided me across the floor; we were the music, our bodies a dance of love in motion, gliding with no effort involved. Marcus whispered in my ear, " It won't be long until our wedded pledge of love unites us in heart, soul, body, and blood for all eternity, making me the most fortunate man alive. "

The early afternoon hours gave way to late evening; Marcus clapped his hands to gain everyone's attention. The waiters brought glasses of French champagne for each of the guests; he raised his glass and proposed a toast. " To the most beautiful and desirable woman in Fredericksburg. I've reserved all my love for you, my new bride. "

We drank and more was poured so I could offer a toast of my own.
“ To my husband Marcus, the man I’ve waited for all my life. ” We entwined our arms to drink and liquid happiness seeped from my eyes.
“ I’ll love you forever, Marcus. ”

He kissed me on the lips in front of everyone, then took my hand and winked. “ My family and friends, it’s close to the midnight hour. In honor of my wife, I’ve renamed our home Castle Desiree’. My bride and I will take our leave of you now. ” We walked a few steps and Marcus turned around.
“ Please continue with the reception and merrymaking, though. ”

He led the way upstairs to the rooms we’d share as man and wife. I thought, this is my home now, the castle of my dreams. I couldn’t ask for more, but I was wrong. The bridal suite was my fantasy come true. The canopied bed was made of rosewood, its strongly marked grain giving off a reddish hue. The sheets were pure white satin, cool and inviting, the cover a deep burgundy that matched the canopy. “ Marcus, how did you know that these are my favorite colors? ”

He laughed. “ I have my ways. ” He handed me a goblet of wine as he raised his in a toast. “ Desiree’, you’ve managed to capture what no other woman has or ever will; all my love. ” We drank the intoxicating cordial and Marcus held me close to his strongly beating heart. “ This is the moment we’ll come to know one another in the way a man knows a woman. ”

“ Marcus, you certainly know how to win a girl’s heart. ” There was no warmth in his kiss as we tasted each other’s sweet nectar. Our tongues danced a tangoed waltz that only the two of us would ever share.

He slowly turned me around, untying the red velvet sash at my waist, bending towards my neck while pushing my hair aside. His mouth felt like Antarctic ice as his lips came into contact with the warmth of my skin; scalding me, leaving me breathless while my burning blood smoldered. His hands deftly unbuttoned my wedding day/birthday gown and my body trembled in that one embraced moment because I didn’t know what he expected from me. His frozen fingertips explored my back in icy caresses from my shoulders down to my waist, yet my body reacted as though red-hot coals had seared me. He slipped the silky material the rest of the way off my body and it landed at my feet in a soft whisper.

“ My Darling, you please my eyes when you blush in Red-blooded passion. ” His lips of steel offered no body heat as they found their way to the bare skin on the upper part of my left breast; I felt a moment of pain and then exquisite pleasure as my heart’s life force formed the letter ‘M’ in that exact spot, his brand on me, telling the world that I belonged to him, now and forever. Marcus gazed deeply into my soul, his fangs and lips now hot with and from my blood. He offered me a cup of bright red liquid, a concoction tasting like sweet honey from the bees and salty Atlantic Ocean waters. His fate rested in my hands as I received his heart and blood; all of his thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, and desires raced through my veins, revealing themselves to my soul. Our minds linked together; I had to willingly supply Marcus with my innocent life force each and every day or he would cease to exist.

His blood was good to the last drop, and I craved to have his body join with mine, becoming the one flesh of man and wife.

“ Marcus? ” My voice cracked with nervousness and my shaking hands made it impossible for me to undo any fastenings. His fingers quickly went about their duties and I assumed this wasn’t his first experience with unlacing corsets. His eyes never left mine as he removed the rest of my clothing; my naked glory, which no man had ever seen or touched, was displayed for my loving husband.

He drew me close, stroking my back as his lips and tongue leisurely explored my mouth at great length, and then his bruising passion demanded that I give my very essence to him. Tidal waves of delight coursed through my body, leaving me with no resistance to his physical advances. I tasted his warmth, savoring all the sweetness his mouth had to offer. My breathing came in short gasps as the minutes ticked by. When he withdrew from my lips, I felt abandoned, all alone in the world. “ Marcus, don’t leave me like this, ” I moaned low in my throat.

“ My Darling Desiree’, you must provide me with more of your own life force. ”

“ Marcus, all of me belongs exclusively to you; take what you want. ”

He smiled sadly. “ Sweet Wife, I need just enough nourishment to stay warm and fan the flames of desire you have for me. ” I grew weaker as Marcus fed from my breast, but my body was overwhelmed with rising passion.

“ Show me how to want and need only you, Marcus. ”

With no hesitation his hands squeezed the mark on my left breast; covering my body in blood, he softly crooned. “ Now I’ll feast on you, my Darling Desiree’. His eyes glazed in red thoughts as he licked and swallowed my life force, his lips finding the pulse points on my neck, branding me as his sole possession, a fact which no one could deny.

His hands journeyed to my breasts, tenderly caressing, rubbing, and massaging both of them. His glorious mouth and tongue nibbled, tasted and teased, enjoying each minute. My swollen nipples were rigid, but hardened into rocks when he sucked on them. Shockwaves of pleasure moved swiftly through my molten veins as Marcus pinched them between his thumbs and index fingers. “ Your nipples are like a fine vintage wine, the flavor of fresh strawberries; I could do this forever. ” My belly glowed hotter than the blazing noontime sun as his magic touch added fuel to the core of my body. His caresses felt like butterfly wings, barely touching, knowing full well that my passion called for more. Marcus picked me up and carried me to our marriage bed; his winter mouth and tongue bathed my inner thighs as he murmured bonding words of love, then his hands swiftly parted my legs, and my body was his to do with as he pleased. He slowly slid one finger inside my slippery body, while his tongue drew circles around my nipple, teasing it to taughtness; there were no thoughts to be had, only sheer feelings of enjoyment and delight. When Marcus slipped two of his strong slender fingers into the cavity of my being, I matched the rhythm of his slow sensual motion.

His reverence was focused on my reactions. “ My Delicious Desiree’, your first joy is the physical gratification of me making love to you. ” His mouth and tongue swirled shockwave kisses of desire on my moistness, the sensitive spot that craved his touch. “ Do you want more? ” His voice was personified pleasure.

“ Yes, Marcus. ” I thought of nothing else.

“ You’re so tasty Desiree’, I’m going to eat you up. ” His hands spread my womanhood far apart and he thrust his hungry tongue into my body, causing sensational explosions to my nerve endings.

“ Oh God, Marcus! ” I screamed his name as my body jerked and spasmed

in utter fulfillment. “ Is this what it feels like to become a woman? ” I asked when my breathing slowed.

“ You’re not a complete woman until you lose your virginity, Desiree’ . ” His eyes were dark with pent-up desire. “ Do you have any idea what a man looks like unclothed? ”

“ Marcus, you’re the first man, the only man I’ll see. ” He touched my cheek.

“ Then I’ll give you the honor of undressing me. ” I helped him out of his mourning coat and he kissed me tenderly. “ Never be shy with me, Desiree’ . ”

Love and trust showed through the windows of my soul. Boldness pulsed in my bloodstream and I unbuttoned the white silk shirt he wore, kissing his bare skin. His chest was smooth and pale, his nipples reddish brown in color. He read my thoughts. “ Touch and kiss me anywhere you choose, my Dearest; that way your love for me will deepen and expand into other areas of our lives. ”

I removed his shirt; he was brutally handsome, his back broad at the shoulders and narrowed at his waist. My hands came into full body contact and I rubbed his chest, enjoying the way his skin responded to my fingertips. I melted into the depths of his eyes, wanting to pleasure him in the same way he had pleased me. I breathed in the scent of his skin as his nipples yielded to the pressure of my mouth, exciting me. His blood pumped through my arteries, bringing intimate messages of truth to my brain. My emotions and body were in a strong state of arousal as my life force raced merrily through his veins, calling me to retrieve it. I welcomed wild temptation and threw caution to the wind, biting down with a vengeance on his jugular vein, tasting my own blood.

He removed his trousers and underwear; I felt no shame in wanting to gaze upon his nakedness. Majestic in his magnificence, he was a lion king wanting his lioness. I was greedy for him to be inside of me and I let my mouth explore and worship at his male temple. I moved up and down on the taste and feel of his frozen hardness and he groaned.

“ You must stop, Desiree’ ; it’s essential that we consummate our marriage while the full moon is shining. ”

I slowly removed my mouth from him, his maleness still warmly throbbing.
“ My husband, my love, possess me fully! ”

Passions and wild emotions over which he had no control were triggered inside of my lion king. He wouldn't be stopped in his pursuit or denied the conjugal rights to his lioness. With gentle roughness he pulled my legs apart, entering my virgin's body with strong hard thrusts, making me his wife, his lioness queen!

I pierced the night with all the pain and pleasure he brought forth, burning sensations to last a lifetime. His voice was ragged as he withdrew.

“ Remember this, my Desiree'; the blood of your virginity is my strength, more precious than wealth, fame or life everlasting. ” He moved his head and mouth to my lost innocence and drank freely, then plunged his swollen manhood into my woman's sex, spewing forth his seed; ecstasy crashed over me in shimmering waves, consuming me again and again in pleasure.

“ Desiree', we are truly one in heart, soul, body, and blood; man and wife, forever and always. ”

In the afterglow of love we held each other. Marcus moved off the bed for a minute, then helped me sit up. He had a huge smile on his face as he handed me a glass of blackberry wine. “ This should relieve any pain you feel, my Darling. ” I drank all of it, and with sheer happiness in my heart and soul, kissed my wonderful husband, and fell fast asleep in his arms.

When I woke, the brilliant yellow sun was already shining into every nook and cranny of the room, hurting my eyes. I sat up, trying to recall the events of Sunday night, but my mind was a hazy blur. My head and body ached; I certainly hoped I wasn't coming down with the flu as I'd taken two weeks worth of vacation and didn't want to waste them feeling sick. A knock sounded at my door. “ Miss Nancy, are you awake yet? ” CeCe seemed concerned as she entered my room without waiting for an answer.

“ I've brought you some breakfast; bacon and eggs, toast, and strong black coffee. ” The sight and smell of food made my stomach churn and waves of nausea swept over me. I ran to the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face, then took a deep breath. I felt somewhat better until I saw

my reflection in the gilt-edged mirror above the sink. The image that greeted me was one of purple bruises and red bite marks on my neck.

“ Are you all right, Miss Nancy? ”

“ No, CeCe. My stomach’s upset and I have a migraine coming on. ”

She spoke in soothing tones. “ Hang on for a few minutes. ” She returned shortly and handed me a cup of steaming liquid. “ Mother said this Lemon Balm tea will ease your headache and the ginger she added will calm your stomach. ”

I drank it down in one gulp, then yawned as my eyes grew heavy with sleep. I crawled back into the comfort of my bed, remaining dead to the world until mid-afternoon. I woke up relaxed, refreshed, and ravenous, wanting solid food and decided to put on fresh clothes, then slip down to the kitchen for a snack. To my dismay, the mark on my breast pulsed with a vengeance and black and yellow bruising discolored my arms and legs. Why me, I wondered? Valera would definitely have her work cut out.

I dressed, then gazed around the room; it was the height of femininity. The antique mahogany bed shone deep rich red in the afternoon sunlight and the satin sheets were the color of Pink Swiss Roses, adorned with white lace borders. The cover had delicate Swiss Roses embroidered on an ivory background, perfectly matching the wallpaper. I opened the door, ready to make my way downstairs, but Sher was on the other side, her hand poised to knock. “ I’m glad to see you up and about, Nancy; we’ve all been so worried. ” She shuddered slightly.

“ Marcus would be very upset if you became ill while visiting my home. ”

“ I’m much improved since this morning. ” I smiled. “ This is a beautiful room, Sher. ”

“ Thank you, Nancy. It was my brother’s idea to let you sleep in this exact replica of his Mother’s quarters. ” She paused, then laid her hand on my arm. “ I hope you’ve been comfortable; if there’s anything I can do, don’t hesitate to ask. ”

“ Sher, can I be totally honest with you? ” She nodded yes. “ I’m embarrassed, but I don’t remember anything that occurred after I drank the

blackberry cordial last night. ”

Sher’s slightly skewed grin reminded me of the Cheshire Cat. “ Some people have a negative reaction to the wine I make for special occasions; you came downstairs, then tripped on the last step. Marcus helped you to your feet and you seemed well enough to dance with him. ” She was convincing as she told the tale. “ The music stopped and you fainted in his arms; he carried you to the bed and I removed your dress and put you in your pj’s. ” Her face reddened. “ I hope you don’t mind. ”

“ I appreciate that, Sher. ” I frowned. “ Where’s Marcus? ” I wanted to ask forgiveness for ruining his party.

“ He’s gone for the day, but I expect him back later on this evening. ” Her mood brightened considerably. “ On the lighter side, most of the female guests sported that green-eyed monster called Jealousy as my brother played the hero; envy so thick you could slice it with a knife. ” Her arm grazed my face and I jumped, then shrieked loud enough to wake the dead. “ I’m sorry if I frightened you, Nancy. ” I didn’t know what to make of her actions; was I an enemy or just having a bad case of nerves?

“ Speaking of knives, would you like a snack to tide you over until supper’s served? ”

After eating a small plate of gala apples and New York extra sharp cheese, I felt invigorated and asked Sher to show me around the castle grounds.

“ After twilight hours the paths can be quite tricky and treacherous, so we’ll go right now. ” She grabbed my hand; the air was fresh and clean as we walked through sweet smelling pine trees to the edge of a canyon. She exclaimed, “ This is my favorite spot! ” The rim overlooked an emerald green valley, filled with oak and pine trees; in the middle of the valley was a sapphire blue lake, sparkling in the bright afternoon sun. Sher’s touch hypnotized me into thinking I could actually fly and I put one foot over the brink that led to certain death. “ Come on, Nancy; it’s time to leave. ” She caught my arm, her attitude and voice filled with triumph.

The setting sun cast crimson and burnt orange shadows on the castle walls as we arrived. Valera met us at the door, an angry grimace on her face.

“ You’d best come inside and get ready for the evening meal. Count Marcus is a stickler for rules and being late puts his authority in question. ”

Regulations, specifications and satisfaction were words that came to mind when I thought of Marcus. “ Should I dress up or down? ”

“ Nothing as formal as last night, but Marcus suggested the ‘surprise’ hanging in your closet. ” A faint smile played on Valera’s lips.

I swiftly ran upstairs and my eyes focused on an elegant red silk dress. I decided a hot shower was in order and I relaxed in the steaming spray, letting all my tensions flow down the drain. I finished in record time and turned off the water. There was a light tapping at the door.

“ Who is it? ”

“ It’s CeCe. I’ve come to help you get dressed for this evening. ” She handed me a huge red cotton towel, and I slipped into a satin-sheen pair of white panties and matching French push-up bra. “ Are you ready to put on your ‘surprise’ Miss Nancy? I guarantee you’ll look stunning! ” CeCe bubbled with enthusiasm. I stepped into the dress and she zipped up the back, then moved to the front, letting out a gasp of delight.

“ Miss Nancy, you are way glamorous. ”

I looked into the mirror; the v-neckline plunged to my navel and I noticed the mark above my heart resembled a fresh wound, while all the bruising and discolorations on my arms and legs had intensified into odd designs. I was filled with despair and began to cry.

She tsked. “ You should be happy, Miss Nancy; this means you’re falling in love with Count Marcus. ”

Valera walked into my bedroom. “ Marcus has laid out specific instructions, giving us thirty minutes in which to finish. I promise we’ll make you lovelier than you were last night. ” She offered me a small glass of dark liquid; hotter than molten lava, it froze into a solid glacier as it rushed through my veins. In a few minutes time a ‘not a care in the world’ feeling enveloped my soul. All thoughts escaped except for wanting to be with Marcus at all costs. I smiled at Valera and CeCe. “ He’ll be well pleased with your beauty. ” Valera’s voice dripped honey.

The mirror didn’t lie this time around. Marcus had impeccable taste in everything he’d chosen for me to wear and I knew he’d tell me I was picture perfect. The bodice above the empire waist was trimmed in shimmery pink-

ice mother-of-pearl, shaped into tiny incandescent hearts. It fit me like a second skin, accenting my womanly curves. The sheer-puffed sleeves rode low on the shoulders and the décolletage plunged into a deep 'v' so Marcus's private brand showed in all its reddened glory. CeCe clasped the ruby necklace around my neck, then put the earrings in my ears.

Marcus stood at the bottom of the steps, staring unabashedly like a man who hasn't seen his one true love in ages. "My beautiful Queen of the Night." Did my ears deceive me?

"Nancy, you're a sight to behold; an enchantress in red." Marcus lifted my hand, then kissed my cheek. "It's refreshing to see your lovely face, to have you grace us with your presence."

"Marcus, you've made me feel like a big part of your family; thank you from the bottom of my heart for this exquisite dress and the ruby necklace and earrings."

He leaned over and whispered softly in my ear. "I've been in love with you since we met at the Charity Ball. An aura of special innocence surrounded you, reminding me of a delicate red rose in full bloom." He placed my hand on his chest and held it there. "Your soul is a fragrant perfume, managing to capture my heart as no one else has before."

I blushed, but couldn't help myself. "Marcus." He put his index finger to my lips.

"I want you to see something." He cupped my elbow and guided me to the far end of the room; above the mantelpiece were two oil paintings. He pointed to the one on the right. "Take a close look at my Mother." I did. "Now, look at your face and tell me what you see." He handed me a mirror.

I examined her portrait, then stared at my face; although my dress was an updated version of hers, my jewelry and hairstyle were the same. The fact was we could pass for twins.

Next to her painting was another woman's portrait; she had black curling hair, ruby red lips, and eyes as green as teal velveteen. I was unable to look away as she spoke in commanding tones. "I'm Marcus's one and only wife, Desiree!" When her spirit entered my soul Marcus vanished.

“ Nancy? ”

“ Marcus, she’s gone for the night! ” I gloated.

He was startled for a brief moment. “ Desiree’, is it really you or am I dreaming? ”

“ Who did you expect, Marcus? ” I wanted to scream her name, but thought better of it. I laughed hysterically, realizing that this was the first time I’d been allowed to interact with him since my spirit had been relegated to my portrait years ago. He was dumbfounded. It took a moment for ‘her’ name to click, but as blood pumped to her brain I knew what had taken place between her and Marcus. “ I know that you believe Nancy’s fresh innocent blood will let you return to your former state of being, but you’re delusional, Marcus. ”

He always thought quickly when faced with insurmountable odds and I waited to see what ideas he’d spout. “ Have some patience, Desiree’. ” Red rage exploded inside of Nancy’s body as her mind told me that Marcus had taken her virginity and love in my name. Her pain added fuel to my own hatred and I vowed revenge against the both of them.

Two could play this game. “ Did you know that Nancy is falling in love with you? ”

“ Yes, Desiree’ and I intend to marry her. ”

“ You should’ve known that I’d eventually be released and just think; you brought home the perfect specimen to house my soul in! Don’t be foolish enough to give up what we once had and can have again. You belong to me Marcus; not to anyone else. ”

“ Desiree’, you’re entitled to your own opinion, but your judgment of her is wrong; Nancy is special, sweet and caring. ”

I stuck my finger down my throat and pretended to gag. “ She’s nothing like me and that’s my fault? ” Once upon a time my heart and soul had been filled with undying love for Marcus, but those feelings were lost when he deserted me like every other man I’d known in my life. I felt no love for

him, but knew he was the only man I'd ever want to spend eternity with. Marrying Nancy, marrying me; what would be the difference? I'd pull the wool over his eyes, take full control and then do as I bloody well pleased.

Did I see tears forming in his eyes? "All the things each of us wants in life will come to us when the timing's right."

"Yes, guilty love can be used like a powerful tool," I thought to myself. In a few short days I'd have everything I wanted, needed, and desired.

"Desiree', please forgive me? You have all my love, as you've had since the very beginning," he said with resignation.

"Marcus, it's time to tell Valera, CeCe, Gustav and the others about us."

Chapter 3

Marcus held my hand and I felt the mixed emotions churn inside of him, knowing without a doubt I must gain complete control of Nancy's mind and soul. Pretending to love him would be my only chance to live again, doing whatever caught my fancy with no questions asked.

I could already hear the wild call, the clear call of the Vampir Familia. In order to partake of the fresh blood I wanted and needed, Marcus would have to drain this body of all its blood; if any of her life force were to remain after they married, all of my plans would come to naught. I'd be tainted, no longer a pure undefiled vampire. I smiled pleasantly, thinking back to the thrills my victims roused in me before I took their blood and life. I did enjoy torturing them as they begged for mercy! What a laugh that they were truly deserving of my skills; no quarter given and certainly none taken.

We turned around to face Valera, CeCe, Gustav, and last of all, Sher. The other servants stood near the rear of the room, waiting to hear what we had decided. "Everyone, I'm happy to announce that Desiree' has returned to us this very evening. She's now Mistress of Castle Desiree' and you'll obey her every command or suffer the consequences."

Valera, CeCe, and Gustav welcomed me with open arms and smiles of

devotion. “ Countess Desiree’, we’re blessed to have you grace us with your presence. ”

Sher spoke with contempt. “ You might have the others snowed with your pious airs, but God and I have you figured out! You’re like a sponge, absorbing every bit of love and care given to you and repaying in poisoned emptiness. It’s a damn good thing I’ll be leaving for Fredericksburg in two weeks. “ Nothing prepared me for the slap across Nancy’s face; stinging pain and tear-filled eyes had never occurred with any of the other bodies I’d occupied. But of course, they’d all been dead and weren’t able to feel anything, good or bad.

Sher stormed out of the room and Marcus brought his lips to her handprint on Nancy’s cheek, then tenderly wiped the liquid from her eyes.
“ Everything will be fine. ”

Nancy’s thoughts invaded my territory as her next three words escaped without my consent!
“ Marcus, my love. ” Bitterness lay ripe on my tongue. What did the myth of emotional love have to do with the events in my life? My heart only had room for needs, wants, and desires; nothing else.

Nancy’s body had myriad bruising, discolorations and bite marks; her light-filled soul ate away at the dark outer edges of my mind, causing it to short-circuit. “ Marcus, I’m fatigued, in need of healing rest after what you did last night. ”

“ Desiree’, reliving our wedding night brought about many pleasurable variations of red. ” Marcus enjoyed replaying every minute over and over again in his mind, relishing deviant thoughts of what had happened in his bed with Nancy, the virgin.

“ Marcus, I wasn’t there with you last night; it’s one thing to play God with a woman who knows just who and what you are, but you had no right to take Nancy’s love and innocence for your own when you’re still married to me. ” Flames of rage flickered inside my heart, growing like a wildfire that couldn’t be contained. I had to rid my mind of her as soon as possible.

“ Desiree’, my thoughts were centered on you last night. ” A smile played on

his lips and his gentle manner soothed me to a certain extent, but I didn't know why. "Come lie down."

Marcus walked me to Nancy's room, his mother's quarters. "This simply won't do; I want to sleep in my own bed, in my own room, surrounded by cherished possessions that are near and dear to my heart."

He shrugged his shoulders, but walked further down the west wing hallway to my rooms and opened the door; I was finally able to touch the reality of my clothes, my jewelry and my bed. I was ecstatic and laughed within myself, making plans to do away with Nancy and take sole possession of her body.

Marcus interrupted my musings. "Are you satisfied now, Desiree'?" Nancy threw her arms around his neck, surprising all three of us. He drew me so close I could feel his heart beating in rhythm with mine and I quickly disentangled myself from his strong embrace. With a sly grin on his face Marcus made a demand.

"I've been too long without fresh blood and yours is what I require tonight, Desiree'." His face showed nothing but sincerity and he whispered sweet and low, "Please don't deny me your life force."

His eyes glazed with hunger as he watched me slowly undress. Nancy's nightclothes were strange to be sure; not a lacy feminine nightgown, but a man's red flannel button down top and matching flannel pants. I left the top three buttons undone and the minute his sharp white teeth bit into the soft, tender flesh of my left breast to feed, calming sensations offered me blessed sleep.

I felt a sharp pricking at my breast and let out a loud piercing cry, emerging from a haunting dream where I'd become an insignificant nothing, a nobody. In that instant Marcus held me tenderly in his warm embrace, as salty tears fell down his cheeks. "My Darling, I was so afraid of losing you." His voice was raw; his black eyes red-tinged coals of emotion.

It took a short while for his words to sink in, but undeniable memories flooded my mind as my blood flowed through his veins. He undermined my thoughts before I could call his Vampire actions a travesty.

“ With the priceless gifts of your love, your life force, and your virginity, you’ve roused my heart from its empty shell, showing me true love for the first time in over a century. ” Marcus kissed me with an unquenchable thirst. “ I love you, Nancy, and there’s nothing in heaven or hell that can ever change my feelings for you. ”

“ Marcus, we’ve only known each other for a short time; is this how love is supposed to feel? ”

A faint voice from a million miles away said, “ Only a hairline fracture separates the twining relationship of love and hate, but you’ve barely begun to pay for your crimes of the heart. ”

Marcus hissed in my ear, “ Love comes in many shapes and forms, my precious Lady in Red. You’re my possession, my one desire, the high voltage spark of love in my life. ” His overwhelming love and passion pierced my heart; I was trapped inside his circle of love, a prisoner with no means of escape. He quickly changed the subject. “ Nancy, do you remember anything about the portrait of my former wife, Desiree? ”

“ No I don’t, Marcus. Is there something you need to tell me about the picture? ”

He smirked. “ No, I was just entertaining thoughts of replacing her picture with a new portrait of you, my Sweet Nancy. ”

The voice of insanity inched a little bit closer. “ Marcus was very wrong in his assumptions; I’m much stronger than he ever imagined and I won’t consent to being replaced by you or anyone else! ”

Without warning, Marcus strode to the door and turned the knob.

“ Marcus, may I come in? ” Sher quietly tiptoed into the room and a knowing glance passed between them. She looked directly at me. “ She does know, doesn’t she, Marcus? ”

“ Yes, Sher. ”

“ Marcus always confides in his sister and they’re not even related by blood. ” I felt perturbed as that cackling voice kept picking at my

mind.

“ Would you care to see his mark of possession on me, Sher? ” Why in heaven’s name was I being so rude when she’d shown me nothing but kindness? “ I didn’t mean those words the way they sounded. ” But in a way I most certainly did.

“ It’s all right, Nancy; blood loss can make a person say and do things that go against their real nature. ” She hugged me. “ Marcus loves you and so do I. ”

Marcus smiled, took a deep breath and on bended knee lifted my hands to his frosty mouth. “ Nancy, the love I feel for you burns hotter than the Sahara Desert at high noon. Will you marry me and become my guardian angel wife? ”

“ Yes, Marcus, a thousand times YES! ” He grabbed my waist and swung me round and round until shades of red swirled and exploded in my mind.

Sher bubbled with delight. “ Marcus, I was just thinking that the perfect day to become husband and wife is Valentine’s Day. ”

My vision became hazy as that tiny voice plagued me once again.
“ Valentine’s Day; no big surprise there. ”

“ Marcus, what in heaven’s name are you doing on your knees? ” I looked around and saw Sher by his side, reminding me so much of... My heart filled to the brim with bitter hatred and I gritted my teeth before I screamed out her name. The clock on the dresser read 5:30 am, one hour before sunrise.
“ Well, Marcus, answer me! ”

“ Desiree’, Sher and I heard you howling like a wounded panther and ran up here to see if you were all right; we found you lying on the floor, curled into a tight ball. ” I didn’t believe that; Marcus cared nothing for me, and Sher only cared about herself.

I looked daggers at both of them and picked myself up. “ Marcus, I’ll only speak to you once Sher has left my rooms. There’s no love lost between us

and she can see for herself that I'm fine and dandy. ”

She kissed Marcus on his cheek, then left my bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

“ Desiree’, I know that being in a strange body means making major adjustments. ” Marcus rubbed circles on the back of my hand, his thumb tracing the outlines of my veins as he mapped out my blood flow. “ I only want what’s best for you, for us, ” he cooed in a voice not quite his own.

I cringed and withdrew my hand, as I knew his thoughts were centered on wooing and winning Nancy’s heart. “ There's no need for that, Marcus. Please be kind enough to send Valera up to me. ” He frowned in consternation. “ Don’t look at me as if I was going to murder Nancy in cold blood, Marcus. Valera can give her an herbal infusion so she can sleep and stabilize her body. ”

Marcus didn’t seem pleased with the idea, but that wasn’t my concern. First and foremost I wanted the pleased satisfaction of coming, going, and doing with no questions asked.

Valera came to my room a few minutes later. “ Countess Desiree’, how may I be of service to you? ”

“ You have excellent credentials, Valera. Your vast knowledge of how herbs act and react on the human body is a plus; concoct a potion to keep Nancy sleeping for the rest of the day, making her weak, while increasing my strength. ” Valera was the one person I could always trust to do what was right for me.

“ Yes, Countess, I know exactly what’s required. I’ll return shortly. ”

Tiredness settled in, making it difficult for me to think straight. Without knocking on the door, Marcus marched in, carrying an elaborate silver tea service on a matching ornate tray; if I remembered correctly, a wedding gift from my Uncle Joshua. He set it on the nightstand by the bed. “ Valera has other duties to perform, Desiree’; she said the tea will help you sleep and the cookies will give you additional strength. ” He was very charming.

“ Thank you, Marcus. ” I actually appreciated what he was unwittingly

doing for me.

Valera always came through with flying colors; I was immune to the dangerous ingredients that were added to the refreshments, while Nancy would succumb to the effects they produced and be driven insane. My lips curled into a huge smile and my heart tingled in anticipation as I ate and drank. The tea mixture included Aconite, also known as Wolfe's Bane by some, Hemlock, which the old folks called Poison Parsley, and Belladonna, the Deadly Nightshade. Mixed together, Aconite and Belladonna would give Nancy the sensation of flying; strange stings would occur in her arms and legs and she'd experience horrifying hallucinations. As an extra-added bonus, the Hemlock would give her vertigo. Valera baked the cookies with Henbane, known in some circles as Stinking Nightshade, a powerful sedative and muscle relaxant. Just a wee bit too much would cause delirium and convulsions, a perfect combination to get the job done right!

"Marcus, I'll see you when the sun sets." He sat by my bed until I drifted off into a deep dreamless sleep.

When I woke, the sun was a vivid yellow, scattering bright light into every corner of the room. Sher stood over me, looking concerned.

"Nancy, you've been out of it for most of the day. I was beginning to fear the worst."

I sat up and stretched my arms above my head. "I've never felt better, Sher. Staying in bed all day has done wonders for my aching muscles. I feel stronger, bursting at the seams with energy." I threw off the covers and bounced out of bed.

"That's good. I was uneasy about the exact amount of herbs to put in your tea and cookies this morning." I gave Sher a questioning look as her eyes darted around the room, seeing phantoms where none existed. "I must explain and can only hope you'll believe and heed the truth of my words." She described how Desiree' had possessed my mind and body, hoping to do away with me. Her voice trembled as she told me what Marcus had done in order to keep me safe. "The first herb I used was Angelica to ward off the evil which Desiree' brought into this world. I steeped the roots to make holy water and to that I added Betony, also known as Bishops Wart to drive away devilish spirits. I mixed Avens, called Herb Bennet into the cookie dough

because it smells and tastes like cloves and has the ability to protect those who ingest it. And to keep the good spirits surrounding you, I used dried Juniper Berries in the icing. Marcus and I are the only ones who know about this. ”

“ Yes, Marcus and Sher. And you and me. ” A slight stab sliced my heart.

“ I’m sure you’ve no reason to lie, but this is an awful lot to swallow in one sitting, so to speak. ” I paused and collected my scrambled thoughts. “ The last thing I remember clearly was Marcus asking me to be his wife. ” I laughed nervously. “ Was that a dream or reality? ”

“ As real as it gets, Nancy. Do you recall your answer? ” Sher asked.

I didn’t need to think of what I said to Marcus. It would always be the same, no matter when or where. “ Yes, a thousand times yes. He wants us to be married on Valentine’s Day. ”

“ We’ve less than two weeks to prepare for your wedding to my brother; the main obstacle is Desiree’. She’s brazen, self-centered, and will attempt to do away with you completely, using your body for her own hell-bent pursuits and pleasures. ”

“ One way or another my boots will walk all over you! ” A small red flag was raised, but I paid no attention to it.

Sher hugged me close. “ I don’t want to see that happen to you, Nancy. You’ve made my brother very happy and that in turn makes me happy. ” Her laugh was filled to the brim with angelic joy. “ He told me that your love has given him wings to fly to heaven and beyond. ”

“ To heaven and beyond; I wonder what that feels like? ”

Sher rolled her eyes. “ The only way you’ll know is to do as I say and begin acting like Desiree’, so there’ll be no questions asked. ”

“ Why should I pretend to be Desiree’? ”

That tiny voice answered the question. “ My life isn’t for the faint of heart or for those who’ve lost their natural instincts; everyone’s supposed to think

you're me. ”

“ Because she’s already made her presence known and if others don’t believe the part you play, you’ll be in grave danger. ” Sher’s smile was slightly off-kilter.

“ Danger is my middle name; I like the thrill of victory, but certainly hate the agony of defeat. ” The words were faint, but clear.

“ Sher, it’s doubtful I can fool anyone. ” My head pounded and throbbed with raw insecurity.

“ Tell the truth; you’re already more like me than you’re willing to admit. ” Pure unadulterated lies inched a wee bit closer to my soul.

“ Clutch the skittering ghosts that invade your nightmares on a pitch black night. ” Sher barely whispered, as if talking in her normal voice would let Desiree’ surface, then take complete control.

“ That will do the trick as I slowly invade every inch of your being. ” A chilling picture of Desiree’ formed in my mind.

Goosebumps covered my arms and I shivered until Sher wrapped her arms around me in a big bear hug. “ The love that you and Marcus have for each other will conquer all your fears and apprehensions. ” She kissed me on the cheek, then glanced at her wristwatch. “ Marcus will be here at sundown, so rest until then. ” She left, closing the door softly behind her.

I fidgeted with the feather pillow, but found no soothing comfort in its cold embrace, so I ventured into Desiree’s bathroom. Her vanity was lined with lotions and ointments galore; sinful scents with names like Crimson, Red Door, Devil’s Delite, and a huge bottle of Deadly Desire screaming, “ Try me first! ”

A sharp rap on the door startled me. “ Where are you, Countess Desiree’? ”

“ In the bathroom, Valera. ”

“ I’ve brought you a glass of ginger tea to calm your nerves. ”

I drank it down in two seconds flat and she refilled it from a silver pitcher.

“ It won’t be long until the Jimson weed takes effect, Countess. ” Laughter drifted from the ceiling in agitating shadows and Valera’s lips dripped with venom in the bright fluorescent lights. “ I’ll draw you a warm bath, to be followed by the rites for your cleansing ritual. ”

The warm bath sounded perfect, but I didn’t know a thing about rituals or their rites. “ Or even their wrongs. ” Desiree’s voice was an itch I couldn’t reach or scratch! I wanted to relax, feel, and be..

“ Just me and you, and you and me, tea for two and two for tea! ” Desiree’ was an uninvited guest, invading my territory.

Valera poured lemon and lime bath salts into the water, then darkened the room; she lit candles of greenish yellow, dark blue, and last of all, purest black. “ Lemon and lime will cleanse you for the ritual purification. ” The candles sent flickering light into the windows of my soul. “ Greenish-yellow evokes jealousy, anger, and discord, while dark blue promotes depression and changeability and the purest black allows evil, negativity, and confusion to reign supreme in your heart of hearts. ”

I slid back in the silky liquid and took my ease, shutting my eyes for a few minutes worth of tranquility. Desiree’ moved my thoughts with no effort, giving me a horrific vision of what had transpired between her and the previous owner of my condo. She talked and laughed with him, then kissed him full on the lips. When they parted, he turned around and Desiree’ blindsided him, sinking her razor sharp fangs into his neck, her fingers squeezing tighter and tighter, never letting go until he was drained of all his blood. He, the corpse in red; she, the vampire in red. “ Another day, another victim; an eternity of all my wants and desires met and satisfied. ” Desiree’s demonic screams reverberated off every cell of my mind’s movie screen.

Valera didn’t take any notice of my body shakes as she helped me out of the tub. “ Now you must sit within the Sacred Circle, encompassed inside the five starred Pentagram. Remember the words, Desiree’. Let the ‘Other World Incantation’ take hold of your spirit. ”

I sat within the confines of the Circle, a naked virgin to be sacrificed to the Great Goddess, surrounded by white and black candles suffused with the scent of nutmeg and mace which enhanced the Jimson Weed effects. I breathed the spicy air and the words of the Ritual Recitation, the Verbal Spell spiraled forth from my lips;

'Come to me Great Goddess of the Night
The One who becomes Two
The epitome of evil
Cloaked in the appearance of innocence
You come in the darkness of night
The darkest night of the soul
To serve those who pay you homage
To bring ruin to those
Who have no knowledge of you
O Great Goddess Kermes Twa
I humbly ask of you
To bring your evil into my soul
To bring your blood into my heart
Let pure innocence be a cloak about me
So that none will see who I am
Until it is too late to turn back
Until they are doomed for destruction
A Sacrifice for you
My Sacrifice for you
My Goddess of the Night
Great Goddess Kermes Twa'

The words were a chanted loop and the faintness of Desiree's voice rose sharply in volume. "We've been truly blessed, Nancy. The Great Goddess herself has listened to our incantation and has granted the wish in our hearts to be the One who becomes Two. Your innocence will shine on the outside while I'll wear her evil in my soul, her blood in my heart. We'll feast together and you'll be privy to partaking of all fleshly pleasures, living for eternity, as we serve Kermes Twa." Desiree' shouted triumphantly. "This way we'll both have Marcus forever."

With no rosy illusions left, I allowed myself to ride the crystal wave of having all the time in the world to say and do as I pleased with no repercussions. Desiree' coordinated our thoughts. "Now that we occupy the same body and spirit, we'll go out tonight and gorge on innocent blood, your first taste of the sweetest nectar on earth." Her crimson fangs glistened eerily. "Once you drink the life force of another, you'll start to change; we'll use your voice to speak, your ears to hear, and your body to feel." Desiree's blood was an ice flow, but her words warmed my heart. "Valera

knows what we'll wear this evening so no man will be able to resist us. ”

Valera showed me the dress Desiree' had chosen; it was crimson with swirls of pale ivory, black, and metallic gold. The bodice was tight; form fitted with a low-cut heart-shaped neckline, while the skirt shimmered in billowy waves to my knees.

“ Countess Desiree' . ” Valera handed me a white linen jewelry box. Inside were square-cut earrings made of the blackest onyx, two ivory and gold hearts intertwined in their centers. The heart-shaped onyx ring was initialed with rubies shaped in the letter 'D.' The necklace was one of a kind, a delicate 24 carat gold serpentine chain supporting an heirloom black opal attached by carved ivory fittings. The opal became transparent as I held it to the light and a tiny ruby suspended in the middle brought tears of joy to my eyes. Valera helped me into Desiree's dress, then put the earrings in place, while I slipped the ring on the middle finger of my left hand. “ Now for the finishing touch. ” Valera fastened the necklace and spoke in tones of love. “ You're beautiful, Countess Desiree' . ”

“ Nancy, your first taste of innocent blood will bring on feelings of a sexual nature and the onyx is worn to still those kinds of desires. ” Desiree' was the Teacher, and I was her student. “ You must promise that our body will remain pure for Marcus, as he's the only man who's allowed to satisfy us in that way. ”

I wanted to be intimate with Marcus, so my memories would be fresh, not a second hand version.

“ When can we be with Marcus, Desiree'? I love him. ”

“ Nancy, for a fact you remind me of me. ” Desiree' understood my feelings, but her thoughts were focused on our upcoming victim of the night and the changes that would occur in our physical structure. “ After we've gorged, each of our blood cells will carry full strength sensations coursing through our body. Upon our return to the castle, Marcus will satisfy those desires for us. ” How I longed for that moment. “ His body blending with yours will be like nothing you've ever experienced before, exploding into a million differing wants and needs in a vast array of red shadings and nuances. ” Red, the life-giving color that held priority above all others.

“ Nancy, pay attention to what I say! Rest assured that Marcus will gladly fulfill your every fantasy with no questions asked, because that's been his single-minded vision from the beginning. ” She laughed. “ Marcus thought

he could fool me, but the Great Goddess always kept me informed of his every action and intention. ” She startled me with her next words. “ I even knew of his aim to marry you on Valentine’s Day! ” She enjoyed sharing her secrets with me. “ We’ll both be married to Marcus and he’ll be none the wiser. ” Desiree’ crossed our heart. “ My promise to Kermes Twa is that I’ll never hurt you, Nancy. Not now, not ever. ”

Kermes Twa came to us. “ I’m the Great Goddess; two in heart, spirit, and body. Listen and obey my words of wisdom. For the next twelve days you may only drink the blood of an uncorrupted person so Marcus won’t be able to detect my presence in you. ” She left an indelible impression on my heart.

Desiree’ added to what Kermes Twa spoke of. “ An innocent’s blood always intensifies your sexual desires, while evil blood always intensifies your hunger for more blood. ” She smacked our lips together. “ Either way is good to the last drop! ”

I sighed, as tears formed in my eyes. “ But Desiree’, Marcus will eventually know what I am when my days are spent in sleeping, and my nights awake. He won’t have anything to do with me and I can’t bear that thought. ”

“ I wouldn’t worry, Nancy. Valera knows all the tricks of the trade, and for the most part, nothing about you will change. ” Desiree’ dismissed any other subjects dealing with a serious nature.

“ Now for your make-up, Countess. Your skin is flawless, but I’ll apply Black Haze eyeliner and Thunder and Lightning eye shadow, then use Rare Ruby for your lips and nails. ” Valera finished and handed me crimson sling back high heels with closed toes.

I spritzed Desiree’s Deadly Desire perfume on my wrists and neck. “ The perfect scent to draw our victim to us tonight, ” she said in my mind. “ Valera, summon Gustav for us. We’ll make our way down the servant’s staircase so Marcus won’t observe us leaving. ”

When Gustav saw us, he doffed his cap. “ Where did you wish to go this evening, Countess? ”

Desiree’s words came tumbling out of my mouth. “ Places to meet new friends and dance the night away. ”

CeCe entered the hallway. “ I know the perfect places for you to go, Countess Desiree’ . ” A current of excitement rippled in her voice. “ The first hot spot to try is Blast from the Past; it’s very upscale and stylish with classic rock music from the 50’s, 60’s, and 70’s. ” She frowned in concentration. “ The only bad thing is you can’t leave there unnoticed. ” Her face brightened considerably. “ Your best bet is Precious Metals; they have a live band playing hard rock and heavy metal. The crowds are noisy and wild, but you can leave with whoever you want, without anybody batting an eyelash. ”

“ All right, Gustav, I’m ready. Valera, CeCe...if Marcus has any questions as to my whereabouts, you know what to tell him. ” Desiree's words rolled off my tongue with ease.

Gustav roared down the driveway at an astronomical speed, the headlights glinting off the winding mountain road. Fingertips hovered above the radio dial and stopped at a classical station; ‘Canzon 15,’ by G. Gabrieli, ‘Concertina for Clarinet and Bassoon,’ by Franz Danzi, and ‘Valse Romantique,’ by Claude DeBussy brought forth visions of enchanting ladies. They were dressed in festive ball gowns, bedecked with gold and silver, diamonds, pearls, rubies, emeralds, and sapphires. Their silken hair worn up with curls cascading down their necks, while their rose, lavender, jasmine, and gardenia perfumes wafted through my dormant memory. The ballroom was alive with men and women whirling and waltzing, smiling and laughing. I didn’t want to be part of this present moment, but dressed in my Barley Gold ball gown, dancing the night away. Blazing emotions and feelings crowded my soul and I knew exactly who I was and what I wanted in my life. My thoughts were rudely interrupted and I was forced to fade into the background once again.

“ Nancy, I didn’t know you went in for that type of music. How quaint. ” Desiree’ babbled on, leaving me confused because I thought she was the one who wanted to listen to the classics. The bright lights of the city made it seem as if daylight had returned in full force; we passed restaurants, movie houses, various stores, and shopping malls. “ Gustav, we girls just want to have fun! ”

“ Yes, Countess Desiree’, but who’s with you? ” Gustav was concerned.

“ Nancy and I are in perfect harmony with her body. We want to get our blood flowing fast and free, letting our temperature rise to the boiling point. Gustav, you’ll accompany us and if there’s trouble of any kind, you know what to do. ” Desiree’ was specific.

Gustav pulled up in front of a sign shaped like a ‘65 Thunderbird Convertible, its garish neon colors blinking off and on, proclaiming Blast from The Past. He handed his keys to the valet attendant and we walked into the club together. Gustav sat at the bar and a waiter seated us at a small round table, lit by a fluorescent orange lava lamp. The atmosphere was noisy, filled with lively people out on the town, having a good time. The disc jockey played tunes that were foreign to me, but familiar to Nancy’s ears. Groups named Styx, Tommy Rowe, Herman’s Hermits, Santana, Three Dog Night, Sugar Loaf, and The Guess Who.

“ I can relate to that name. ” Nancy heard me and we laughed in unison.

I jumped when a hand came down to rest on my shoulder.

“ Do you want to dance? ” The man attached to the question had short brown hair and dark brown eyes. He wore a short-sleeved red shirt, black Docker pants, and a black tie with red stripes. “ Nancy, it’s so nice to see you. We’ve missed you at the office. ” He smiled warmly and pulled us close in a bear hug. “ I thought you were going to the beach for your holiday. ” He looked us up and down, then nodded his head.

“ Yes, you do look marvelous in that dress, but then you always look beautiful, no matter what. ” His eyes sparkled with merriment.

Desiree’ flew the coop, leaving me in charge for a while. “ Mark, you’re a wonderful friend and I thank you for the compliment. I’ve been visiting Count Marcus at his sister’s home on top of Red Ridge Mountain. ”

Desiree’ said, “ Mark has secrets that he wants to share with you, Nancy. ” Her next words were quiet as a whispering ghost. “ But it’s way too early to think of an undisclosed confidence. ” She prodded me with her spirit.

“ Dance with him, Nancy. ”

The dj played songs appropriate to our situation, giving me access to the dark side of my soul, where Desiree’ lived and assumed control. ‘American Woman,’ by The Guess Who. ‘Black Magic Woman,’ by Santana and ‘Evil Woman,’ by Electric Light Orchestra. Desiree’ and I were two against the world, no longer harboring feelings of being lonely or afraid of

life. Finally out of breath, Mark and I sat down. He put his finger in the air, catching the waitress's attention. "I'll have a straight scotch whiskey, and if I remember correctly, the lady will have a Ruby Fizz."

"You've never forgotten, Mark." The last two songs that Desiree' and I heard were eerily prophetic.

'Taking Care of Business,' by Bachman Turner Overdrive and 'Dust in the Wind,' by Kansas. I laughed uncontrollably in silence. We'd be taking care of business, all right; a responsibility that would leave a poor soul blowing like dust in the wind. Desiree' interrupted my train of thought.

"My Dear Nancy, I'm in complete agreement; the enjoyable pleasure which comes from drinking innocent blood will leave you with exciting memories to pass down to your children and grandchildren, but first we have to find the one who'll be our sacrifice to Kermes Twa." She tapped our foot in annoyance, ready to move ahead into greener pastures.

"Mark, I need a change of pace. Gustav's going to drive me to a club called Precious Metals. Want to tag along?"

"Nancy, a lot of riff-raff and biker gangs frequent that bar, so I'll keep you company." Mark wasn't too pleased.

Desiree' whispered, "Having a male companion along might not be conducive to finding the sacrifice." She thought for a few minutes.

"Gustav can slip him a mickey, then you'll drive him home. Mark won't remember a thing!"

"Your idea is perfect." A picture of innocent red liquid mixing and intermingling with my own life force was an unquenchable fire racing through my veins. "Desiree', I want, I need."

Mark and I climbed into the Mercedes and soon the cityscape gave way to the warehouse district on the outskirts of town fronting Redrose River. Total darkness enveloped the area except for the lighted marquee; 'Come See the Hottest Show in Town Featuring the Brain Jumpers! Starting at Midnight and Ending...'

Mark and I got out of the car to sounds of loud talk and riotous laughter as people milled outside the club, waiting for the band to start. Catcalls rang

out in our direction and an unidentified voice yelled,
“ Hey, Hot Mama, get rid of that preppy you’re with and party hardy with us! We know how to show a Lady a good time! ” There were hoots and hollers when I gave the scruffy group a longing stare. The fire inside my arteries thickened into molten lava as their hot liquid called my name.
“ Come drink your fill of us, Nancy. We can calm and comfort you. ”

I stepped towards them and Desiree’ split my eardrums. “ STOP! ” I froze on the cracked concrete and her voice trailed off. “ Nancy, slow down; this isn’t a ritual that can be rushed. The Great Goddess will point out our prospective blood donor. He must be a pure undefiled virgin in all aspects of his life. None of those gentlemen fit the bill. ”

Mark grabbed my arm and pulled me to the door. “ Those jerks are nothing but punks. Are you sure you want to stay? ”

“ Of course I do. ” The club walls gave the effect of reality, but were metal illusions of bright gold, shiny silver, burnished copper, and polished to a sheen brass in the minimal light. A waitress dressed in gold lame’ short shorts and halter-top led us to a square bronze table with matching chairs. She shouted at the top of her lungs to be heard above the noisy music and din of the crowd. “ Our house specialty is the popular and potent PMS; Precious Metal Stinger made with yellow chartreuse, gold rum, zubravka, golden gin, pineapple juice, and apricot brandy. ”

“ That sounds good to me, ” I yelled. Mark raised two fingers.

The music was hard and deafening and featured groups like Elvis Costello with Brian Eno, Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds, Rob Zombie, Alice Cooper, Danzig, Meat Puppets, and Screaming Jay Hawkins. The song titles were strange but somehow fitting.

‘My Dark Life’, ‘Red Right Hand’,
‘Hands of Death (Burn Baby Burn)’, ‘Deep’, ‘Unexplained’, ‘Frenzy.’ The clock struck midnight and the house lights dimmed, while onstage lights were brought up to blinding brilliance. The lead singer for the Brain Jumpers caught my eye. His pure white hair flowed to his shoulders and his piercing blue eyes captured mine, gazing straight into my soul.

Desiree’ said, “ He’s the Chosen One. We’ll drink of his life force tonight as Kermes Twa decreed. ” The band played their songs; ‘I Can Take You to

Heaven or Send You to Hell,'
'Would You Sell Your Soul to Me,' and 'Love Is a Killer.'

At 1am Mark went to the men's room and Gustav slipped the mickey into his drink. The band took a break, and our victim sauntered over to the table, speaking in a raspy smoke-filled voice.

"You're a lovely vision, and I'd certainly like to know you better." He lifted my hand to the warmth of his lips. "My name is Adrian, Beautiful Lady. Would you care to join me in a drink after our next set?"

I replied, "Yes, Adrian. I'd like that very much."

Chapter 4

Adrian walked a few steps, then turned around. "By the way, what's your name?"

"It's Nancy," I said.

"Perfect." I hadn't given a second thought to Mark, but he arrived just as Adrian made a surprise announcement. "This song is dedicated to my new friend, Nancy. It's called 'Whispers of the Midnight Longing.'

Yes, you'll listen to the whispering voices
Your Midnight Longing reappears
What you crave are deadly choices
While your heart is bleeding bitter tears

First, your eyes grow red with frenzy
You can't stop what you've begun
Your reality fades, your dreams spin, dizzy
Your Midnight Curse, your Desire will come

Did you really think she loved you
All that's left are desperate, haunting dreams
The whispering voices say,
"You didn't have a clue"

Left in your world, nothing's as it seems

Will you play the fool for love again
Invite your lonely heart and soul to break
Or turn away, from all love abstain
Allow your tortured eyes to see
Only colors grey and bleak

As you listen to the screaming voices
You are fast consumed by Midnight Longing
The promise of your new love
Is a question made of deadly choices
Celestial life or eternal death she's offering

Adrian's dedication didn't sit well with Mark. "That phony doesn't know you the way I do." Mark downed his drink in one gulp and grabbed my arm. "Let's get out of here, Nancy. I have to work in the morning, even if you don't."

"I'm sorry, Mark." I didn't want to hurt him.

Desiree' sensed my feelings and took full control. "I had no idea Adrian was going to do that." The lying words slipped from my lips with ease. "Mark; please tell Gustav we're ready to leave."

I spoke rapidly to Adrian. "I need to drive my friend home, but I'll be back in time to have that drink with you."

Mark and I climbed into the back seat of the Mercedes. His eyes drooped as the knockout drops took effect and he laid his head on my lap. I traced the outline of his jaw, then moved my hands to his neck and applied just enough pressure to feel his pulse lightly beating. "Nancy, there's so much we need to discuss." My fingers burned red hot with his thoughts and I jerked away.

Desiree' scolded me. "As a Vampire, you're privy to an individual's thoughts, emotions, and feelings, but you can't let them get the better of you. With time and experience you'll be able to master this art; then and only then will you receive the exquisite gift of the Empath."

I felt chastised in a way I hadn't since living in the orphanage. "What about

Adrian? ”

“ The Great Goddess will supply us with all the information he’s not willing to disclose. ” Desiree’s demeanor was one of sure certainty.

Gustav brought the car to a stop in the parking lot of Blast from The Past. I took Mark’s keys from his trouser pocket, then slipped into his Datsun 280Z and carefully drove to my condo with Gustav tailing close behind. He carried Mark’s sleeping form to the couch in my den and I left him a short note saying I was going back to Castle Desiree’ to finish out what was left of my vacation with Sher and Marcus.

On the way back to Precious Metals, I leaned over and turned on the radio, searching for...Desiree’ stopped our hand on an obscure station with the call letters WDEV. “ Nancy, one of Adrian’s songs is up next. I just love the way he speaks about a ‘thret to the innra sanctus’; a threat to the inner sanctum. Listen closely because I’ll ‘dirigere eower life’; direct your life. ” The lyrics spoke volumes to my heart.

Directed Action

‘As long as you don’t pose a threat
To my inner sanctum
Which the winds of change can never reach
That place where all my feelings and emotions live
I’m fine and dandy, all right
All’s well that ends well

Once my security has been breached
I usually; always in reality
Back away each and every time

Entice me, tease me, taunt me
Dare me to come to you
See me for what I am; imperfect and impure
See if I have the courage, the strength, the mettle
I tell myself I lack

Do you have the key to unlock and mesmerize
Unleash the stranglehold and hypnotize

Untwist, uncoil, unwind until you set me free
Until I have no guilt, no shame
Until I am the action to your direction'

The guitar riffs died away and Desiree' gave me no time to let his words sink in. "Do you recall the way I came to you, did everything mentioned in the song to and for you?" She wormed herself a little deeper into my heart.

"But Desiree'."

"Nancy, I'm the key, the only judge and jury to unlock all the mysteries behind your red door. I've pardoned you of the world's guilt and shame, and released the leaded chains wrapped so tightly round your soul." The Great Goddess swayed me like a weeping willow tree in a stiff March breeze. "It's not permitted to lie to me or to yourself on this chosen path; falsehoods only lead to unhappiness and confusion."

My mind twisted, whirled, and eddied in an unfamiliar pattern. "Nancy, sit back and relax in the passenger's seat." I envisioned Desiree' holding the reins to my fate as I slowly disappeared into the Zero Zone.

"That's not what Kermes Twa or I want from you!" Desiree's screams reverberated into every nook and cranny of my brain. "As a Vampire, your vow and pledge is to stay with us, giving life to our wants, needs, and desires." Hot tears flowed down my cheeks. "Nancy, if you fade away, then so do we."

Desiree' had changed from the persona who only wanted my body for herself into someone I couldn't pin down. I wasn't sure what she had in her mind or my mind for that matter. "I thought you wanted complete control forever."

"Once upon a time, that was my intention, but now we're both possessions of each other." Her smile enveloped me. "We'll be in balance soon; two halves of a brand new species that Kermes Twa will blend into a whole. She says your purity and innocence makes her evil more powerful, allowing fulfillment for her specific purposes. I hope you realize you're the first person I won't fully possess." Desiree' was quite happy in revealing this bit of news, then continued on a serious note.

"No one starts out as a Vampire; we're the lonely, the weak, and the abused.

We're sought out to become new and improved versions of our former selves who are accepted as strong conquerors of life, enduring what's placed on our plates." Comprehension spread out into feelings of undeniable joy that Desiree' quickly quashed.

"The Great Goddess will give you visions of my thoughts, as my emotions overtake your body. In your new life it's important to feel everything except for pity and sympathy; if they're allowed to grow, they'll become a festering infection that leads to a major downfall." She was an expert in her field and her mind shifted into low gear, slow and cumbersome. "I was terribly shy and lonely as a child; my parents traveled from one continent to another, leaving me in the care of nannies and governesses. I didn't receive love from anyone, so I ate in order to stifle my negative feelings. At fifteen I lost a great deal of weight and developed womanly curves." Intense pain spread throughout my soul.

"Older men noticed and at first I didn't mind the flirting, but being a father figure wasn't their main consideration." Desiree's heartache intensified.

"There was one man in particular who befriended me at a summer dance held in our home. He told me how grown-up I'd become and that he wanted to be my 'special friend.' We walked through the flower gardens surrounding our house; I can still smell the perfume of the roses, the lavender, and the night-blooming jasmine. He treated me as an equal, always making me feel important and worthwhile. Events progressed and soon he wanted to do more than talk and hold my hand. I hadn't been taught how to reject the unwanted advances of a man, so I let him kiss my lips and touch my body, feeling guilty and ashamed. Later on I found out he had a wife and children and even a daughter my own age; that's when I told him I wanted nothing more to do with him." Burning hatred replaced the pain I felt. "I pushed that episode deep into my mind, and in that way I didn't have to deal with the hurt he inflicted on me. When I turned sixteen, my father found me sitting alone in the parlor with a close family friend who was twice as old as me and divorced." I felt her father's slap and heard him tell her she was a whore just like her mother and no longer a daughter of his. "I wept when he said I was damaged goods and no upstanding young man would want to be associated with the likes of me; that's when I was banished to an all girl's school in Europe for two years." The rage was replaced by an iron will of determination. "When I met Marcus in Fredericksburg, I thought he truly loved me, but he left me just like all the other men in my life." She smiled while her experiences lingered in my mind, leaving me stirred and shaken. "Nancy, you've been greatly honored as I seldom share myself with anyone." Her pacifying honesty seeped into my soul. "Close your eyes

and let the Goddess be your guide. ”

‘ Oh, Great Goddess Kermes Twa
Let the serenity of your innocent side
The calmness of your gentle side
Come to us at this moment
Let the tormenting pain and hurt
Be removed from our body
So that we may accomplish
The set deeds you ask of us this night
As we perform
The ritual sacrifice ‘First Taste of Blood’

A unified calmness washed over my body, reviving and refreshing me with no hint of frustration or thwarted purpose.

When Gustav pulled up in front of Precious Metals, the clock’s green radio dial read 1:45 am, but it seemed like hours had passed in conversation. A waitress met us at the door and led us to a ringside table with an up-close view of the stage. “ Adrian said your drinks are on the house. ”

“ There’s nothing like a Devil’s Sidekick. ” Desiree’ left no room for arguments. “ It’s similar to a Zombie, but has an extra added ingredient. ” With flair the waitress set a tall glass of red liquid in front of me; pineapple, orange, lemon, lime, and coconut greeted my taste buds at first sip.

“ Desiree’, this reminds me of a children’s party punch. ”

“ That’s the beauty of it, Nancy; the Devil takes his own good time to pitch his fork into your side! ” Her laugh was wickedly humorous.

Warm hands rested on my shoulders and Adrian’s breath tickled my cheek. “ I’m glad you made it for my last set so we can get to know each other better. ” He softly brushed his lips against my neck, sending delightful sensations coursing through my blood.

I gave him my brightest smile. “ Was there a particular person you had in mind when you wrote ‘Whispers of the Midnight Longing’? ”

“ I was inspired by the vision of your beauty, Lovely Lady; it’s the easiest

song I've ever written. " He jumped back onstage and grabbed the mike. " Hey all you Punkers and Rockers, it's time for your brains to be jump started with L-O-V-E! " Adrian was encircled in the spotlight and the crowd clapped, cheered and yelled. He spoke in a wistful whisper to Desiree' and me as the band played a sad and melancholy tune.

' Think Or Feel

What do you think, what can you feel
Assuming that you'll leave me tears to cry
Can I trust a single word you say
Are your answers to my questions, truth or lies

A hundred walls I've built around my heart
You discard them brick by brick, one by one
I wait enraptured for this Love you give
To strip my flesh right to the bone

What will I feel, when you are done
Do I have the strength to deal with fear
With unknown consequences, grey area borderlines
What will I do to keep you near

When all is said and done, it doesn't really matter
I freely give my saddened heart to you
You alone now have omnipotent power
You alone decide my fate, do what you will do

You see the beauty in my ugliness, the new in what is old
Twinship formed in daylight brightness, dark star of Gemini
I'm reborn to live the way I think, the very way I feel
Life's journey is the pathway, intersecting truth and lies

Desiree's necklace had turned to ice against my breast, but burned like a red-hot poker when Adrian sang this song. The pulsing action of its inside ruby created a craving that cried out for his fresh innocent blood to co-mingle with mine, a fix for my addiction.

The noise was deafening as Adrian came to our table and proffered his hand. We walked towards his backstage room and the crowd of autograph seekers

parted like the Red Sea did for the Israelites. He opened the door and white flickering candles cast grotesque shadows on the walls and ceiling.

“ Please have a seat. ” Adrian pointed to a white pillow in the middle of the floor, then positioned himself opposite of me on a black pillow. He crossed his legs, closed his bright blue eyes, then held his arms out and extended his fingers to their full length. His rugged features took on an aura of peace and contentment as he slowly inhaled and exhaled for a few minutes.

“ Adrian, you certainly don’t fit the profile of a typical rock-star; I figured your walls would be plastered from floor to ceiling with posters of you and your band, and garish lighting to make sure unwary visitors would have no way of missing them. ”

“ I come to my sanctuary and write songs and music to keep my spirit balanced and recharged. ” He stood up, then disappeared behind a printed white wolf screen. “ Is this more in keeping with your image of me? ” He’d changed into faded blue jeans and a flowing yellow rayon shirt.

My fingertips glided up and down his sleeve, feeling a familiar and comforting strength in his muscled arm. “ Adrian doesn’t want or expect you to act forward! ” Desiree’ was past upset.

Adrian’s laugh had a pleasant ring. “ Each of the colors I surround myself with has a purpose. For instance, bright yellow helps me mentally ground and center my thoughts. ” He lined up seven white candles and placed them in front of the white wolf screen. “ These signify fidelity and bring me protection, purification, and spirituality. ” He lit them one by one.

“ I live according to the rules set forth in the Conduct Code of the Higher Principle and the white wolf’s protecting spirit governs every aspect of my life. ”

“ Adrian, tell me more. ”

“ The white wolf honored me with his powerful gifts and the integrity of his values. ” He gathered my hands in his. “ Like the wolf, I’m territorial, providing protection first and foremost for myself so I can guard my family and friends. ” His grip strengthened.

“ I harbor no fear, but I’m not reckless. The wolf’s sense of adventure and excitement lets me explore new places and things that broaden my horizons; my family and friends know I’ll return to share what I’ve learned. ” His

body language signaled boldness and forthrightness. “ I carefully plan my strategies, and wait patiently for the right moment to enact them. ” My thoughts strayed to thoughts of Adrian’s blood, but were quickly staunched. “ Nancy, the minute I set eyes on you I felt at ease. ” The warmth of his mouth caressed kisses on the back of my hand, then he gazed deep into my eyes and continued. “ It’s as if we’d met before, but found the need to reacquaint ourselves. ”

Desiree’ said, “ He’s the ultimate test, a worthy conquest that we’ll draw into our web of blood. ” She licked our lips, savoring thoughts of warm sticky redness. “ This is just the adventure Adrian wants and needs with us. ”

“ Adrian, you’re a man of mystery and intrigue. ” A subject I wanted to sink my teeth into.

He ushered me through a side door and we strolled over to his 1999 dark metallic brown, fully loaded 4-wheel drive Ford Explorer XLT. The body was high enough off the ground to require a footstep; I grabbed hold of the side handle and pulled myself into the passenger’s seat. “ Nancy, are you sure this vehicle is safe? ”

I rolled my eyes in exasperation, but asked Desiree’s question. “ Adrian, why on earth would you need something this big to drive? ”

“ I live off the beaten path and the back roads get muddy and rocky out in the boondocks. ” He slapped the SUV with his open palm. “ She always gets me where I need to go with no problems and I chose this color for protection from harm. ” He checked his rearview mirror and revved the engine. “ Buckle your seatbelt and let’s go! ”

We left the city lights far behind and drove into the mountains. “ Tell me about yourself, Adrian. ”

“ My father and I lived in Sheridan County, Montana, near the Canadian border and the closest town to us, if you’d call it that, was Redstone. ” He shifted into low gear as we climbed further up into the hills. “ My father was a forest ranger and we spent many hours in the wilderness together. Between communing with Mother Nature, and reading and writing when I stayed home, I was happy in life. One day we went to photograph wild creatures

and by pure luck came upon a rare white wolf in the midst of an aspen grove.” He spoke with awe and reverence. “The minute I saw him, we locked eyes and his spirit entered me. That one moment changed my life forever; I closely examined his ways and put into practice what I learned.” He paused for a minute. “Now it’s your turn to open up.”

I felt at ease in the sincerity of his voice. “I grew up in an orphanage not far from Springfield, so loneliness was my way of life. I never had any friends until I started working as David Winslow’s executive assistant.” Waves of happiness welled inside my heart when I told him how I met Marcus at the Winter Charity Ball and he invited me to visit him at his sister’s home. “Adrian, I’d pictured a nice two-story house with a white picket fence, but was totally surprised when Gustav stopped in front of a fairytale castle in the clouds.” Talking with Adrian was so simple, so easy. “His sister’s name is Sheridan and I’ve been treated like an adored family member.”

“Shut up, Nancy!” Desiree’ certainly knew how to break a good mood. “Take a deep breath and collect your wits. You can’t let him draw you out; it must be the other way around.” Her tongue was sharper than a razor blade against my soul.

“Ah, we’ve something in common then. Sheridan is an unusual name to say the least.” Adrian shouted in my ear. “Hang on tight with all your fingers and toes!”

Even with the seatbelt pulled snugly against my body and my hands glued to the above door handle, I bounced and slid like a rodeo rider trying to stay on a raging bull for 8 seconds or longer. I gritted my teeth as we flew over the roughest hills and gulleys I’d ever been on. Desiree’ didn’t seem to appreciate the aches and pains that jolted my body, but just as her irritation rose to the boiling point, Adrian slammed on the brakes. He helped me down from the seat and graciously bowed. “Welcome to my humble abode, White Wolf Lodge.”

“It was a trip I won’t forget anytime soon.” Fresh pine resin scented the crisp night air. The silvery moon was full, while countless stars dazzled like brilliant sequins on a black velvet dress. Amidst this beautiful scene I grabbed Adrian’s hands and asked him to dance; he spun me around in dizzying circles and when he finally set me on solid ground, he reached over and ran his fingers through my hair. I trembled as he gently placed his lips

on mine, then demanded more and more, leaving me breathless.

He pulled away. “ Nancy, you looked so angelic in the moonlight, I just couldn’t resist! ” Conflicting emotions hit hard; Adrian’s mouth stirred long-forgotten feelings that left me with unanswered questions, while pangs of guilt made it impossible to forget Marcus and his love.

Tears welled in my eyes, but Desiree’ had no sympathy. “ Don’t be a remorseful ninny; as long as you go no further, what difference does one kiss make? ”

Adrian turned on the lights, then wiped my cheeks. “ My kiss upset you, didn’t it? ” He sat me down on his couch and looked me straight in the eye. “ I wanted to take everything slowly, because you’re such a special lady. ” He held me in his arms, while I continued to sob. “ When you showed up at the club, I felt as if we’d known each other forever. ”

I finally gained a bit of self-control. “ Adrian, please forgive my reactions; I don’t have much experience when it comes to men. Your kiss meant a lot, but I certainly have to know and trust a person before I can go any further. I hope you understand. ”

“ I agree with you whole heartedly, but followed my gut instincts when I kissed you. Maybe it’s my way of howling at the moon! ” He imitated a wolf call to perfection.

I smiled at his actions. “ Although I only caught a glimpse of your handkerchief, it was most unique. ”

He showed me the whole picture embroidered on the white background. “ This belonged to my mother, and was handed down through her side of the family for generations. Poseidon is god of oceans and mariners and depending on his mood, he sends fair or foul weather. “ The god hovered in the heavens, looking down on a split picture of the same ship; one under blue sky and sunshine, the other under the black clouds and lightning of a raging storm. ” He stared intently at me. “ I’m told that some of my forebears were sailors on the sea. ”

A faint tingling rushed through my veins. “ What kind of dreams did you have about me, Adrian? ”

“ I dreamed we met on a clipper ship, but I’ve never sailed the seven seas before. ”

“ Saltwater running through your arteries? I have no idea what’s flowing in my bloodstream. ” I sighed.

He kissed my forehead. “ I’ll make us some hot chocolate. ” While he was in the kitchen, I looked around. The huge fireplace was fitted with rocks in various shapes, sizes and colors. Above the mantelpiece was the most realistic oil painting I’d ever seen. I was startled when Adrian placed his hands on my shoulders and whispered, “ That’s my own painting of the white wolf in the aspen grove; each time I look at him, new revelations of where I want to go in my life occur to me. ” He bent down, laid a match to the logs and the fire crackled into red and yellow flames that quickly spread heat throughout our bodies.

“ Would you like to know the meaning of your name? ” My ears perked up and I nodded yes. “ Nancy is derived from the English pet form of Anne that comes from the Hebrew name Hannah, meaning ‘Grace’. She surmounts life’s obstacles with the healing influence of patience and the benefit of time to help her achieve wholeness in life. ” He moved closer. “ She uses her intuition to get along with people, knowing when to move ahead and when to retreat. ” He kissed my cheek. “ She’s charming and an easy mixer who enjoys reading, writing, and speaking. ” He clasped my hands between his. “ Her natural sense of self-protection extends to others, but many of her life’s lessons will come through tests surrounding the proper use of her potent will. ”

Adrian no longer talked in general terms about my name, but got up close and personal. “ I’d adorn you with lapis lazuli, moss agates, and carnelian stones and scent your body with Night Blooming Jasmine. I’d dress you in the color of your eyes, such a deep royal violet a man could get lost in them. ”

He leaned in to kiss me, but Desiree’ cut him off. “ That’s intriguing, Adrian. ”

He sighed, then continued. “ Did you want to ask me about any other names? ”

“ Yes; Mark and Marcus. ”

“ Those two names are interconnected. Mark is derived from the Latin name of Marcus, which originated from Mars, the Roman god of war. Mark has a very quiet and withdrawn personality, but if you manage to find a topic of conversation close to his heart, he’ll open up and reveal a lively and interesting side of himself that not many people see. He’s insightful and curious and loves the adventure of extensive travels. ” Desiree’ drifted off, while I listened with fascination. “ The philosopher combines with the sensualist in Mark’s name. He’s very individualistic and requires a great deal of alone time, but is most comfortable having a partner by his side. ”

“ That’s pretty close to the Mark I know and love, ” I told Adrian.

Desiree’ came back into sharp focus. “ What was that reference to you loving Mark? ”

“ He’s nothing more than a good friend, Desiree’. ”

“ It had better stay that way or we’ll all be sorry. ” She was perturbed.

“ Marcus is able to give and receive love and has the capacity to be happy and well balanced if he surrounds himself with good friends. He’s a natural born leader and acts in the best interests of those who follow him. ” Adrian paused, then added one last sentence. “ Nancy, does the name Desiree’ ring a bell? ”

I stared at him in shocked silence.

Chapter 5

I held my breath as Adrian’s voice darkened with emotion. “ Nancy, in my dreams you’re the spitting image of Desiree’, my heart’s desire. ” Relief surged through my veins. “ Do you remember the first song I dedicated to you, ‘Whispers of the Midnight Longing?’ ”

“ Of course, Adrian. No one’s ever given me a gift of this magnitude. ” I

smiled.

“ Your nightly visitations guided me, but even in my wildest fantasies I didn’t believe you’d become a reality. ” He crushed my hands in his. “ My last girlfriend and I broke up eighteen months ago; I loved her enough to ask her to marry me, but she laughed in my face, then refused my offer. After she left, unrelenting voices in my head kept telling me I didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of finding true love in my lifetime. ” His eyes glittered, drawing me into their depths. “ Nancy, you’re so easy to talk to, and the kiss we shared was a natural culmination of feelings, thoughts, and emotions that have finally been released. My craving is to be your choice, eternally. ”

He pulled me onto his lap and I laid my head on his shoulder. “ Adrian. ” My lips parted and I sank my fangs into the honeyed taste and mercurial sensation of his virgin blood. Shivering goose bumps of pleased fulfillment engulfed my senses in pounding waves of salty sweet bliss.

I wanted to continue feeding, but Desiree’ nipped that thought in the bud. “ It wouldn’t bode well for us if he died from your gluttony. ” She tsked and hastily withdrew our fangs, then licked every last drop from his warm throbbing neck.

Gustav had followed us to White Wolf Lodge and stepped into the living room from the kitchen shadows. He applied a potion of agrimony and amaranth to Adrian’s wounds, while he explained their medicinal uses. “ Agrimony, called church steeples and cocklebur by others, has astringent properties that speed up the healing process. ” He swabbed another lotion on the bite marks.

“ Amaranth, also known as love-lies-bleeding, lady bleeding, and prince’s feather, gained favor in the 17th century when the Doctrine of Signature prevailed. To adherents of this doctrine, the bright crimson of these flowers signified blood; a clear indication that the plant would stop any kind of bleeding. ” His lips curved in a smile. “ This liquid medicine hasn’t failed me yet. ”

“ Kermes Twa will supply the Incantation of Forgetfulness to erase this memory from Adrian’s mind. ” The words of the Great Goddess reverberated throughout my body;

‘ Oh Great Goddess Kermes Twa
You have helped us in the past
Tonight we have sacrificed to You
Blood of the Innocent, Blood of the Chosen
His is the first blood, the best blood
Bright red blood
Received under the bright hunter’s moon
May he forget what we have done
While his desire for us remains
A burning flame within his heart and soul ’

“ Tonight your eternal membership into the Vampir Familia has taken place and we’re official sisters of the night, bonded together by Adrian’s innocent blood. ” Desiree’ wrapped me around her little finger as she whispered, “ Live dangerously with your truth! ”

Adrian was fast asleep and snoring gently when we left White Wolf Lodge. Morning’s darkness greeted us as we climbed into the Mercedes; the dashboard clock read 4 am, but it seemed like a lifetime of guilty pleasures had passed while we were in Adrian’s company. Desiree’ offered me her own brand of comfort. “ Nancy, in the beginning stages of vampirism, time is a great fooler; for us, a minute can stretch into days on end, but as your experience broadens, you’ll learn that our timing is always perfect. ” Of course, Desiree’ didn’t practice what she preached. “ Gustav, get us back to the castle so we can be with Marcus. ”

My body tingled all over when she laughed and I licked my lips in anticipation.

“ Do you remember me telling you about the extra-added ingredient in the Devil’s Sidekick? ” Desiree’ elucidated. “ It’s called yohimbe and combined with Adrian’s life force, your sexual appetite will intensify for the next 4 hours; every inch of your body will be electrified with sensory overload as Marcus makes love to you. ” Desiree’ captured my attention. “ I know this memory will last an eternity and be all you’ve hoped for. ”

Gustav shut the engine off and rolled quietly up to Castle Desiree’. Once inside I made my way up the back stairs to Desiree’s room. It was dark as a tomb inside and I got the unmistakable feeling that someone was watching my every movement.

I slowly turned towards the burgundy chair; Marcus pinpointed his black-red embered eyes on me, his voice raw with angry emotion.

“ Where have you been, Nancy? ” His hands were a vice grip on my upper arms. “ Do you think I’m a man with no feelings about where you go and who you see? ” He brought his face close to mine. “ I’ve been sick with worry. Desiree’ wants to substitute herself for who and what you are, then use your body for her own wicked intentions. ” Marcus made his hatred of Desiree’ clear as he wept with distress.

“ Nancy, I’m not ashamed to let you see the reality of my love and devotion. ”

Waves of guilt rose swiftly in my heart, but were quashed by Desiree’. “ Marcus, I’m sorry for making you worry. Please forgive me? ” I kissed his salty cheeks, tasting the texture of his rough stubble. “ I love you Marcus. ”

With no hesitation he plunged his frostbitten fangs into my left breast, feeding for nourishment and domination. All thoughts left and feelings dazzled with blasting starbursts as Marcus absorbed my life force, his frozen lips melted with the heat of my blood. His fingers dug into my shoulders and he smiled in cruel triumph. “ Look me straight in the eye and show me the truth of your love and desire, Nancy. ”

Would he detect Desiree’ as he stared into the windows of my soul? Kermes Twa permitted him to see my shining innocence and purity, while she blocked out the dark side of our midnight feeding on Adrian. Marcus reigned kisses on my eyes, trailing them to my nose and cheeks, then captured my lips in his, sculpting their outline with his tongue. I shivered in delight as sensations tripled their effect on my nerve endings and I opened my mouth to his explorations; he tasted of cinnamon and cloves and his trip through my territory took both of us to lofty heights of passion. Even Adrian’s kiss in the moonlight paled in comparison to the high voltage sparks that danced along my spine as Marcus touched, then nibbled and sucked on my tongue. “ You’ll be my sole possession; I’ll quench your thirst, but leave a raging inferno behind in your memories that surpasses anything either of us has ever felt before. ”

My bliss was pure and unadulterated. “ Don’t ever stop loving me, Marcus. ”

“ Not even a raging bull could stop the actions of my love for you. ” The warmth of Desiree’s necklace matched my heartbeat, bleeding sunset red against the walls, tinting every nook and cranny throughout her room. Marcus rubbed the necklace back and forth between his hands, looking at it from every angle; his attitude changed from warm and loving into cool and calculating. “ Where did you find this particular necklace, Nancy? ”

All my hopes and dreams faded in his hate-filled gaze. “ I found it inside Desiree’s closet. ” I trembled, waiting for his wrath to engulf me.

Marcus snarled his distaste. “ Desiree’s dress and earrings. Even her signature ring on your middle finger. ” His thumb traced the ruby encrusted ‘D.’ “ I distinctly remember giving them all to her. ” I was sure he wanted to add, ‘Not to you!’

“ Why did you feel the need to play dress-up with all of Desiree’s adornments tonight? ”

Desiree’ came to my rescue, her words tumbling out of my mouth. “ I wanted to be the most beautiful, alluring woman you’d ever laid eyes on. ”

“ Nancy, if that were the case, then please explain where you’ve been all evening; you certainly didn’t care to impress me with your loveliness! ” There was no warmth left in Desiree’s room, only feelings of dread.

“ Once I put on Desiree’s dress and jewelry, all I wanted to do was dance the night away. ”

“ Being a traitor suits you, Nancy! ” Desiree’ snickered.

I followed her lead into Benedict Arnold’s mindset. “ I felt an overwhelming urge to be the center of attention. ”

“ Go on, Nancy. I’m listening. ” Marcus softened his tone a bit.

“ I’ve never been a party girl, but I couldn’t resist having Gustav drive me to Blast from The Past. I met up with one of my office co-workers named Mark and we drank, danced, and talked for a while. ”

“ Marcus is a sucker for honest sincerity! ” Desiree’ howled with glee.

“ Where else did you go? ” Marcus asked with bemused curiosity.

“ I wanted freedom with no repercussions, so we headed to a Southside club called Precious Metals. ”

“ This just gets better and better. ” Desiree’ grated on my nerves.

“ Did you go there alone, or did you invite your friend? ”

“ It’s true I invited Mark...”

Marcus cut me off. “ Nancy, it hurts me deep inside to know you were with another man, and not thinking about us and our upcoming nuptials. ” He brought his hands to my face and crushed his lips and mouth to mine, bruising me in his passion. “ Did he kiss you this way and have the audacity to tell you that he loves you? ”

I raised my hand to slap his smirking face, but he caught my wrist, then twisted my arm behind my back. “ Marcus, you’re hurting me. ”

“ Tit for tat, My Dear. You’ll find that my behavior and conduct mirrors your own; good for good, and bad for bad. ” He scowled. “ Are you attracted to him? ”

“ Mark’s a wonderful friend and I value his judgment, Marcus; he advised me to let nothing stand in the way of the love we share. ”

He eased up on my arms, then gently traced the black and blue marks that his handprints had made. With quick ferocity, his fangs bit into my wrist vein. My blood flowed willingly to his mouth and he savored my thoughts, feelings and emotions. “ Nancy, your life force tells all and you’re forgiven this time around. ” He kissed my forehead as if I was a recalcitrant child in need of a better upbringing. “ From now on we must vow a blood oath of honesty to each other. ” He reached into his coat pocket, removed a sharpened letter opener and drew it across his wrist, so only a thin beading of blood rose to the surface. Then he slowly raised my wrist to his mouth; I thought he’d bite down again, but he licked his tongue across its width. My eyelids drooped in anticipation, but instead of igniting my passion, a razor sharp stinging consumed me. Marcus rubbed our two wrists together in

circular motions.

“ Swear on all that’s holy to be open and honest with me. ”

The thought of saying ‘no’ never crossed my mind. I could say ‘yes’, but had my doubts that Desiree’ would adhere to his rules and regulations.

“ Your only problem is to be yourself with Marcus, and I’ll do what I’ve always done; follow my whims to wherever they lead me. ” Desiree’ bowled me over with her earnest integrity.

“ Cross my heart and hope to die! ” Words from my childhood emerged and I was sure Marcus would be angry again, but he laughed in delight.

“ You’re refreshingly different from any other woman I’ve ever known. ” He slipped Desiree’s ring off my middle finger and replaced it with an exquisite golden band. The center bore an oval shaped lavender moonstone, surrounded by an inner circle of seven square cut emeralds and an outer circle of seven pear shaped opals.

“ I always wondered what happened to that ring. ” Desiree’s voice was a whisper on the wind.

Marcus put his hand under my elbow and guided me to the full-length mirror, then stood behind me as we stared at our images. “ The person I see reflected is a young woman pretending to be someone she’s not meant to be. ” He removed Desiree’s earrings and tossed them out of sight, then leaned down and grabbed my left earlobe between his teeth, biting hard enough to cause pain, but no blood.

“ Don’t close your eyes to this moment of pleasure; I want you to see the glorious feelings I bring out in you. ” Being forced to stare at my physical likeness unnerved me and I wanted to turn tail and run, but his next words kept me glued to the spot. “ The mirror doesn’t lie about who and what we are; lovers forever. ”

“ Nancy, Marcus is the most unique man when it comes to producing untamed currents of love and lust. ” Desiree’ paused as if reliving an old memory, then smiled knowingly at our reflection. “ You’re beautiful in his eyes as well as mine, because we love you the most. ”

I wanted to reach out and kiss her, but settled for Marcus’s frozen touch. His greedy lips drew my throbbing neck vein into his thirsty mouth. “ Your life

force is the sunshine that's been missing from my soul. " His smile personified a general who's won a resounding victory over the enemy. " Let me indulge your unrestrained fantasies and make them all come true. " His hands kneaded the upper portions of my breasts, and then he delved his fingertips inside Desiree's dress and lightly teased my nipples. " My Love, you're so softly pliant that I'll mold you into the woman I want you to be. " He touched the opal hanging between my breasts, and my entire body flowed in ruby-colored red.

" You're the paper and I'm the pen, writing my language in sonnets of love to your body and soul. " The yohimbe released the floodgates to my pent-up sexual passion and my body trembled.

Marcus deftly unzipped Desiree's dress and it fell into a swishing heap around my ankles. " Look at your womanly curves; see how my hands trace your outline, fitting you to perfection. You'll feel no shame when you gaze at yourself through my eyes. " I was left in red; silk stockings, high heels, lacy French bra with matching hi-cut bikini panties, and my own flesh.

" Am I as beautiful as the other women you've been with? "

" Nancy, you're a vision of heaven here on earth and I'm the luckiest man to have your angelic spirit grace this castle. " Marcus brought my hand to his chest. " And my heart. " He scooped me into his arms and carried me down the hall to his frigid quarters; my breath condensed into a thousand meteors of white lightning until we approached the back wall and the temperature increased to soothing warmth. Marcus gently laid me on his bed and I snuggled into the goose down mattress; all my troubles melted away in the heat of his smile and the comfort of his surroundings. " Welcome to your new home, My Darling Nancy. " Desiree's opal shown brighter than a desert sunrise, radiating from the center spotlight of his bed, till every corner was awash in crimson. Marcus fluffed all the pillows that lay in wait, then propped me into a sitting position. " You flicker like the devil's fire, an angel of ardor dressed in red-blooded passion. "

He sat at the end of the bed and placed my legs across his lap, then slipped my shoes off in quick succession and tossed them over his shoulder. His practiced touch was smooth as he leisurely rolled the elastic banded stocking from the top of my left thigh, past my knee, over my calf and ankle, then off my foot entirely. He proceeded to do the same with my other stocking. His massage began with my bare feet; he ran his thumbs up and down my soles, relaxing me, while the yohimbe kicked in with deadly force.

Nibbling, sucking, biting every toe was sheer heaven to my senses and I sighed in pleasure. His tongue and mouth found my left ankle, licking, sucking, kissing me all the way to the back of my knee, then down to my ankle again. He crooned soft and low, “ I’ll feast on you until we’ve both reached the lofty heights of Heaven and the burning depths of Hell. ” His glistening fangs quickly pierced the vein behind my knee and I uttered his name in complete submission. “ Nancy, do you trust me? ” He didn’t wait for my reply, but stood up and rummaged through his dresser, rounding up dozens of beautiful silk scarves in varying shades of red. He laid them out in front of me. “ Pick four of them. ” The first scarf was palest pearl pink and Marcus nodded his head. The second scarf was the hot pink of exotic hibiscus. Marcus smiled. The third scarf was ripe juicy summer fruit, watermelon red. The fourth scarf was firecracker red, matching the heat that traveled over every inch of my skin. He returned the rest to his dresser, then showed me one last scarf. It was heavy silk, the color of a scarlet tanager, with small black triangular corners. “ This corresponds exactly with my deep desire for you. Red as my blood, black as my jealousy. ” He insisted I turn around and face the wall; I sat on my knees as his hands undid my bra clasps. He removed it, then inhaled the scent of my perfume and skin into his flaring nostrils.

Marcus put his hands underneath my breasts and tested their weight, while roughly rubbing his thumbs over my nipples. They were sensitive and hard as rocks, engorged to the bursting point. “ Don’t move an inch! ” Darkness enveloped the room as he blindfolded me. He twisted my shoulders, then shoved my back against the pillows. I stretched out my legs, then lifted my arms above my head at 45-degree angles, my hands coming into contact with the bedposts. “ Perfect positioning, My Dear. ” Before I could ask what he meant Marcus tied each of my wrists tightly to the columned wood. I wanted to scream, but heard laughter coming from my throat instead. “ The fulfillment of your fantasies has just begun. ” He climbed on the bed. “ Raise your hips for me! ” I did, then felt cool air stir on my body as he stripped away my last item of clothing. “ A glorious sight to behold, ” he said with reverence and awe. “ You’ll be immortalized in my heart and soul forever as the most desirable woman in the world. ” He kissed my feet, breathing deeply. “ Now for the piece de resistance. ” He pulled my legs further and further apart, then took the last two scarves and tied my ankles to the remaining bedposts. I was naked and vulnerable, shocked and scared, but welcomed anything and everything

Marcus had up his sleeve.

There was complete silence in his room, then an unexpected sound of music wafted sweetly overhead, vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place it. " Marcus? This reminds me of wooded hills, and a secluded waterfall lake. "

" Don't you recognize your favorite song? " Violins and cellos surrounded me like a soft blanket of clouds as Marcus brought his mouth to mine and our breaths intermingled. The taste of cinnamon and cloves brought back vague memories, which lingered on the tip of my tongue.
" Remember for us. "

A glimpse of a young man and woman laughing in the sunlight crossed my vision, but faded from view when Desiree' spoke. " Forget everything except the here and now. "

" Marcus, don't focus on anything except the present of me that I'm offering to you. "

He seemed disheartened for an instant, then pressed a cup to my lips.
" Drink this source of power and purpose. "

The liquid rushed to my brain, etching new dimensions that recreated unfamiliar scenes and locales. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled amidst black and grey storm clouds, overflowing into huge droplets of cold biting rain. I stood inches away from the edge of a cliff and argued with a young woman until a shadowy figure appeared from nowhere and pushed me over the rim. I heard an evil screech of laughter in the back of my mind when I hit the rocks on the canyon floor. " She only got what she deserved! "

His lips came down on mine in a harsh kiss of unrelenting passion, and then he untied the blindfold. The electricity of his gaze stunned me, and I no longer felt Desiree's presence. " I've made my pact with heaven and hell and hedged all my bets. You're the only woman in my life, now and always. "

A stranger's voice overshadowed everything I felt. " If he untied this body for just a second, I'd show him a thing or two about heaven and hell! " My arms and legs strained at the scarves.

“ I sense some hellcat desires rising to the surface, Darling. This lion king certainly can't be made to roar without his lioness! ” He laughed with amusement, then continued his all out assault, biting my lips as he forced his tongue inside my mouth. His light as feather fingertips traveled up and down my body and aroused me. “ Say my name! ”

“ Marcus. ” I moaned in pleasure.

Our tongues tangoed and waltzed in tangerine swirls that lingered in my soul. His hands and fingers journeyed in slow caresses, stopping at certain erogenous zones along the way to stroke and tantalize me into a frenzy of no denial desire. His fingers drew circles around my breasts, leisurely making their way to my nipples. He tweaked them, pinched them, and toyed with them, all the while gazing deep into my inner sanctum, watching my excitement grow by leaps and bounds. When Marcus was sure I was under his spell, he moved his mouth to my twin peaks, sucking and nibbling, nipping with his sharp teeth, moving their stiff rosiness back and forth with his tongue. He bathed my breasts in his hot saliva, biting into his mark of possession. His fangs dripped with my life's blood as he let me taste my own need of him.

I wanted more of his kisses, but that wasn't what Marcus had in store. He licked around the outer edge of my navel and I shivered in anticipation, vividly imagining his pointed fangs piercing my skin, pushing his tongue into the miniature cup of my mid section as it quickly filled to the brim with succulent blood. My flight of fancy turned into razor sharp reality as he sucked and swallowed again and again. His drenched mouth dripped blood from my belly button to my parted lips and I savored the sweetest nectar in the world. “ Gaze inside my mind at the visions I live with since I took your virginity and love for my own. ” He offered me his right wrist to feed from. Crimson fountains overflowed into cascading waterfalls that flooded his world in liquid-red drowning pools.

He tore the clothes from his magnificent body, then trailed kisses of brutal passion and biting bravado from one engorged vein to the next. My neck, wrists, and ankles all throbbed and Marcus finished his job in black and blue fang marks. His mouth, teeth, lips, hands, and fingers were untamed and unrestrained, his adrenaline surges pumping faster and faster as his bloodlust and the yohimbe from my sexed cells sent messages for him to complete what he'd started. He went on a rampaged treasure hunt to find the hidden

jewel of my body. His hands parted me, fingers entering and leaving my body, while his thumb worked magic in circular motions on the center of my being, then he sucked my femininity into his feverish mouth, his tongue rolling and flicking my button of desire.

“ Oh, Marcus! ” I gasped and screamed out his name, my body almost over the edge of no return. He moved his mouth to my lips and his hands lifted my hips to meet his swollen manhood. He plunged into my slippery body time and time again, with harder and stronger strokes, his seed spewing forth into a memory of gushing ecstasy that would last for eternity and beyond.

His name echoed against the walls, coming back to join Desiree’s wails of triumph. “ The promised deed is done and finalized according to your instructions, Great Goddess Kermes Twa! ”

I wanted to concentrate on what she meant, but Marcus distracted me by looking deep into my love-glazed eyes. “ Nancy, you’re the most exciting lover I’ve ever had the pleasure to be with. Your mind has all kinds of possibilities just waiting to be explored. ”

My breasts shook like bowls of jello that couldn’t be contained as tears of unbelief came to my eyes. I gasped for air, then started to hiccup. Marcus untied the scarves from my arms and ankles and briskly rubbed them.

“ Is being with a novice more stimulating than being with an experienced woman? ”

“ My Dear, the only way to satisfy the physical, spiritual and emotional needs is to be with the person you truly love. ” Marcus kissed me full on my crimson lips and held me tight against the beating rhythm of his heart.

I stroked his back in lazy motions. “ I feel as if I’ve known you longer than three days, Marcus. ”

“ But you have. ” Marcus sounded overly sure of himself.

I shook my head. “ That’s impossible. ”

“ It was a mere slip of the tongue. I should’ve said being in love with you has made me feel like we’ve known each other for a lifetime. ”

“ Even though his cover-up might have you convinced, there should be no doubts in your mind that Marcus knows far more than he’s willing to admit to. ” Desiree’ and Marcus both had me confused.

I laid my head on his chest and fell into a peaceful sleep for a short time, but kept reliving the nightmare of being pushed over the canyon’s rim to hit the sharp angled rocks below.

I rolled over to Marcus’s side of the bed seeking comfort, but it was cold and empty. Desiree’ took it upon herself to investigate a thin sliver of light against the far sidewall. She drew back heavyset velvet curtains and let morning’s brilliant sunshine thrill me with a glorious view. Off in the distance white puffy clouds drifted past reddish gold mountains, while closer to Castle Desiree’ were wooded hills of pine, oak, and hickory. “ Now turn around. ” The masculine setting was rich with Old World effects. There were no pictures or paintings on the walls, but ancient woven tapestries depicting knights in shining armor, elegant ladies in waiting, and kings, queens, princes, and princesses dressed in colors of hunter green and midnight black. Near the back wall were two thickly upholstered burgundy chairs with a small round table between them. The polished redwood floor promised warmth, but freezing currents raced under my bare feet as I walked to the foot of the bed. The aromatic cedar chest looked huge enough to...

“ Stuff a body inside! ” Desiree’ shouted with ghoulish good humor as she finished my train of thought.

I felt hands on my shoulders, and jumped in fright. “ How’s the most beautiful woman in the world today? ”

Desiree’ said, “ Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. ” That’s when I noticed the ugly puncture marks and distorted bruising on my naked body.

“ There’s no need to cry. ” Marcus gently wiped away the liquid on my cheeks, then skimmed the surface of my skin. “ Every mark, every bite, every discoloration tells me how deep your love is, but what pleases me most is the bond of our connected souls. Come, I’ll prepare a bath for you. ” He opened a concealed door and revealed a modern bathroom with antiqued brass fittings and a gigantic claw foot tub.

Marcus added a mixture of green, brown, and red herbs that smelled of cinnamon, peppermint, spearmint, peaches, and cherries to the steaming water. I immersed myself in the fragrant liquid and he squeezed my hand, stripping me of hidden barriers entrenched around my heart.

“ I have access to what you’ve written in your soul. ”

‘ Kindred Spirits

We each live our lives, whispering in the universal dark
Heavily familiar in our prayers, needs and wants
Each day’s burden more unbearable than the last

Breathing solemn sighs laced with salty tears
Saddened that our broken hearts house our unloved souls
Desperate for our inner thoughts to be heard and answered

Practicing our daily rituals in our misguided hopes
That someone in the great expanse of God’s forever
Can grasp the sweet slow motion of our minds
And recognize us as kindred spirits ’

I was un-nerved even before the door rattled, but Valera was a sight for my sore eyes. She placed a crystal tray loaded with fresh fruit by the bathtub, then handed me a silver goblet. “ This pomegranate smoothie will help you feel better, Nancy. ”

“ Thank you, Valera. ” She and Marcus watched intently as I drank every last drop from the chalice. She left and Marcus dangled pieces of apples, apricots, blackberries, oranges, pears, raspberries, and strawberries over my open mouth.

“ Marcus hasn’t lost the knack of capturing young innocent hearts, but he’s hiding his true intentions behind a veil of secrecy. ” Desiree’ tried to stifle a gloating vision of the Cheshire Cat as she asked him about the herbs and fruits.

He snickered. “ Don’t you trust me, Nancy? ” I got the distinct impression that Marcus saw a glimpse of me in a new and different light that didn’t appeal to his ego. “ The herbs promote healing of your body and the fruit will replace the energy you’ve lost. I love you and want you to be healthy

and happy. ”

My heart absorbed his words like a thirsty sponge, but Desiree’ laughed maliciously as he pulled me forward in the tub and washed my back in soft circular motions. The overwhelming smell of sweet summer flowers made my head swim. “ Marcus, what kind of soap are you using? ”

“ Focus your eyes on scented lavender fields and let your mind spread out into acres of feelings. ” His voice stirred long forgotten memories.

The same young man and young woman I had glimpsed before were having a picnic by a secluded lake. After they finished their meal of cold chicken and delicious blackberry wine, he glanced at his pocket watch, got up and grabbed her hand in his. “ Come with me, Bethanie and we’ll walk to the waterfall. We’ve plenty of hours left before celebrating our engagement party tonight. ”

“ All right, Marcus. It’s been weeks since we’ve had time for ourselves. ” Bethanie’s face was flushed with pleasure. They walked hand in hand through an open meadow, abundant with summer wildflowers. “ The scent of lavender and lilac reminds me of our first kiss a year ago today, Marcus; sweet and heady like the blackberry wine we drank with lunch. ”

She giggled with glee as Marcus spun her around till she was dizzy. He kissed her full ripe lips and whispered, “ I know it’s only two more weeks until we’re married, but it’s hard to tell my body it must wait to be with you in the way a man is with a woman. ”

Bethanie laid her head on his shoulder and sighed, bringing untold joy to his heart.

The midday sun beat down on their heads as they walked across the meadow. They removed their shoes and splashed their feet in the small stream that flowed below the waterfall, then climbed small rocks to a spectacular view. Bethanie exclaimed, “ This is the most beautiful place on the face of the earth! ”

Marcus gazed into the depths of her emerald eyes. “ Bethanie, the world’s most lovely vision stands right here in front of me; nothing compares with your radiance and glory. ”

They stepped into the cascading force, feeling the liquid coolness wash over their bodies. At the cave's hidden entrance he tenderly held her face and kissed her.

“ Sweetheart, I promise to be faithful and true, loving only you always and forever. ”

“ Marcus, you're the man I want to spend the rest of my days with. ” She melted into the strength of his warm embrace.

“ We must start back if we don't want our relatives and friends thinking we've ruined their fun by eloping. ” His voice was wistful.

They walked out into the dazzling sunlight and she turned to face to him. His heart nearly burst as he stared into the windows of her soul and beheld all the love of the universe stored there just for him.

Her private thoughts were filled with spite. “ Yes, he fell hook, line, and sinker for my charade! Men are so gullible! ”

Chapter 6

I opened my eyes to Marcus, as awestruck recognition registered in his voice.

“ My Precious, I see your spirit residing within the windows of Nancy's soul. Return and give me what's rightfully mine. ”

I felt like dust in the wind. “ Desiree', didn't I give Marcus everything that was mine to give? And who's Bethanie? ” Tears overflowed and rolled down my cheeks. “ Doesn't he love me the least little bit? ”

“ It's a cruel joke that those who say they love you the most are the first to betray your heart, soul, and body. ” Desiree' yawned in boredom.

“ Bethanie's my twin sister, and Marcus seems to think her spirit has been reincarnated in you. ”

“ Marcus, what does this Bethanie person mean to you and why do you want her to return? ” I felt utterly violated, and a tortured sickness lay heavy on my heart. “ I thought you only had feelings for me. ”

“ Nancy, you must remember something if you’re asking me about Bethanie, because I never mentioned her name. ” Marcus was smug in the answer he gave.

I was upset with him, but distraught within myself as the tiniest rustling, a swishing of gold colored silk and the scent of Night Blooming Jasmine came tumbling back into my memory. “ Marcus, I might be naive when it comes to relationship matters, but you won’t find me playing second fiddle in this orchestra. There’s no way on God’s green earth that I’ll pretend to be this woman for you! If you can’t love me for who I am, then I won’t consider being your wife. ” I turned away from him, shaking with uncontrollable rage. “ Please send Valera to me so I can get dressed, then I want Gustav to drive me home. ”

“ Nancy, I never meant...”

I faced him directly, cutting him off in mid-sentence. “ Marcus, all I know for sure is that you’ve hurt me to the quick. ” Sufficient anger sparked a brewing showdown and he left before I said words which couldn’t be taken back.

Valera entered the bathroom with a huge crimson towel and I stepped out of the tub, wrapping myself in luxurious Egyptian cotton. “ Please pick out some comfortable clothes for me to wear and pack up the rest of my belongings, Valera. ” I collapsed on the bathroom floor, while my fragile heart shattered into a million pieces. Like Humpty Dumpty, I saw no way of gluing the jagged edges back together again.

She gathered me into her arms. “ Miss Nancy, this pain will gradually fade and be replaced by love that’s stronger and deeper than you ever hoped for. ” She rocked me back and forth while my tears flowed like a river. “ You may think I don’t care one whit about you, but that’s not the truth. Countess Desiree’ has a special place in my heart, and now so do you. ”

My weeping spell ceased and I breathed deeply, banishing my sniffles. “ Thank you for being a true friend, Valera. ” I smiled. “ Could I have a few minutes to myself? ”

“ Of course. I’ll lay your red chino pants and white hooded pullover on the bed. ”

She left me sitting on the small vanity chair, but the moment I stood up dizziness engulfed my body and my aching head spun in tight concentric circles. My stomach was consumed by gut wrenching pains and everything came up in heaving waves of nausea.

Desiree’ reveled in devilish laughter, bringing on a new round of torment for my stomach. “ Oh, Nancy, it must’ve slipped my mind, but after ingesting innocent blood for the first time, your body rejects any form of human nourishment! ” She left me to endure my anguish alone.

Valera heard my sounds of agony and helped me to a sitting position with my back against the wall. She bathed my face and wrists with a cool cloth and CeCe walked in. “ Stay with Miss Nancy until I get back. ” She returned with a cup and saucer. “ This is ginger tea, laced with ground willow bark to calm your stomach and ease your dizzy spells. ”

Valera was right. The sickness gradually eased and they helped me to one of the overstuffed burgundy chairs. I plopped down and closed my eyes, wanting peace and quiet, but Desiree’ made an unscheduled visit. “ A brilliant inspiration has come to me, Nancy. You tell Marcus how awful he’s made you feel and that he owes you big time! ” Wheels and cogs moved in fast succession. “ You insist that Valera and Gustav accompany you to your condo and stay with you while you recuperate. Marcus will hastily agree because he wants them to keep a watchful eye on you and then report back. Rest assured that Marcus harbors no doubts in his mind about your returning to Castle Desiree’ and him. ”

“ CeCe, please get Count Marcus for me. ” Unbearable sorrow circulated throughout my heart because Marcus had put his full focus on Bethanie instead of me. I didn’t hate him, but there was no way in heaven or hell that I’d easily forget or forgive his actions.

He came and knelt in front of me. “ Marcus, you seem hell-bent on destroying my life so you can be with your Precious Bethanie. Just to set the record straight, I have no intentions of assuming her role for you! ”

He was calm as he gathered my hands in his. “ My Darling, I’m sorry I

brought this kind of pain to you, but dormant memories have been awakened. ” I hated him for knowing the truth. “ You can deny what you already know, but it won’t change a thing. These recollections need to be fully explored so you can comprehend and understand love that transcends any and all time restrictions. ”

“ Marcus, you’ve put my mental and physical well being in jeopardy. I’m not going to remain here at Castle Desiree’ with you, but I don’t think living alone is the answer, either. If it’s not too much trouble, please allow Valera and Gustav to reside with me for a while. ”

His face was crestfallen, his eyes filled with misery and pain. “ I was hoping you’d stay so we could resolve this situation. ” I looked away and he placed my hands in my lap, then kissed me on the cheek. “ Love will show you the path back to me. ” Before he left, he spoke softly to Valera and Gustav. “ I’m entrusting Nancy’s life to you; keep her safe for me. ”

The last four days had been a journey of heavenly delights amidst hellish undertakings, but I was in need of simplicity and normalcy. I breathed a sigh of relief as Gustav took my suitcase to the Mercedes. Sher waited near the bottom steps of the servant’s entrance and gave me a warm hug. “ Nancy, is there anything I can say or do to make you want to stay? ” She spoke with kind sincerity, but Desiree’ rolled her eyes in disbelief.

“ Sher, thank you for your love and concern, but I need time alone to collect my thoughts about Marcus. ” We walked to the car together. “ I’ll keep in touch and let you know how I’m doing. ”

Valera sat upfront with Gustav and I climbed into the back seat, then closed my eyes for a minute’s worth of peace, but Desiree’s words gushed out of my mouth. “ Gustav, Nancy and I are going on a shopping spree to the most exclusive lingerie shop in town! We’ll charge every item we buy to Marcus. ” She giggled like a little girl who’d been given free reign at the local toy store.

“ Desiree’, I want to go home and check on Selma and make sure she’s all right and...”

“ Quit your babbling! ” Desiree’ let out a long breath of air. “ I suppose it wouldn’t hurt and I’m sure if I asked your black Persian cat, she’d tell me all

your secrets which I'd be more than happy to keep in my heart's safety deposit box. " I shook my head. " Such little faith you have in me! " She winked.

" What she knows wouldn't raise an eyebrow, Desiree' . " She prodded me. " It's what I don't know that baffles my imagination. When I came of age in the orphanage, I asked about my birth parents, but the director didn't have a clue. The only paper in my records stated I was found by a passing motorist on a deserted country road. She took me to social services and although the authorities searched and sent out fliers asking if anyone had any information about me, no one came forward. "

" That's subject to change at the drop of a hat or this key which unlocks treasure troves of information. " I pictured the skeleton key she held in her hand. " When the timing is right the mysteries of life and living will reveal themselves. "

I suddenly felt weak and on edge and Valera noticed. " Nancy's body has been depleted of vitamins and minerals and is in need of nourishment. "

We were close to Madison's Grocery Store. " Gustav, turn in here, please. "

" Yes Miss Nancy, or should I call you Countess Desiree' from now on? " Gustav was quite serious.

" Countess Nancy will do just fine. " Everyone was pleased with my words.

Valera entered the store and Gustav got out to stretch his legs. " Desiree', can I ask you something personal? "

" As if I could or would stop you. " She smiled.

" Certain facts about your life have puzzled me for days on end; like the relationship between you, Marcus and his mother? It's odd that both of you were named Desiree' . "

She tsked. " Marcus wanted to meet you in the first place because of your remarkable resemblance to his Mother. "

" That still doesn't answer my question. "

“ Hold your horses! ” Desiree’ pranced in my mind. “ The answers aren’t complicated at all. My mother read a newspaper article about Countess Desiree’ Bethanie. She loved the name so much that when my sister and I were born, she wouldn’t let any other names be used. ”

“ Desiree’...”

“ Now you want to ask me about Bethanie. ” She yawned. “ I’m already tired of hearing her name. My parents doted on her because she obeyed every rule and regulation they put forth; to them she was the perfect daughter! My nickname for her was ‘Bedazzling Bethanie.’ She definitely knew how to impress, astonish, and temporarily blind everyone she came in contact with. She traveled extensively with my parents and they gave her the best of what the world offered. ” Desiree’ sighed deeply. “ For the longest time I never knew why all three of them hated me so much, but that’s of no consequence now. Together, we’re a better actress than Bethanie ever thought of being; two halves of a whole, portraying innocence on the outside while being a fallen angel on the inside. ” She stage whispered.

“ And who does that remind you of? ” Hot salty tears stung my eyes.

“ Don’t ever feel guilty about evolving into who you were always meant to be! ” Desiree’ became my soul confidante. “ The Great Goddess says you’re the melody to my lyrics. One can be enjoyed without the other, but blended together they reflect harmonic sculptures in exquisite shapes and symbols. ”

“ Desiree’, you have a beautiful way with words. ”

“ Those words belong to Kermes Twa. She only shows her softer side to those of us who’ve splendidly pleased her. In pride and joy she claims us as her daughter. ” Desiree’ spoke for the first time with happiness in her voice.

“ Desiree’, would you consider being my sister of the heart? ”

“ I’d consider that an honor and privilege, Nancy. Kermes Twa is thrilled with your thoughts and emotions and soon she’ll reward you with the family you’ve always dreamed of. ”

Valera walked back to the Mercedes, followed by the owner’s son pulling two carts filled to the brim with grocery items. Gustav opened the trunk and

I rolled down the window. “ Hi, Wes, long time no see. Where’ve you been?
”

“ Working on a business degree at college here in town. I was going to drop this envelope by your place later on today, ‘because a guy named Mark Patterson said it was important that you receive it. ”

My name was written in big bold letters and Mark’s note intrigued me. ‘ My Mother has recently moved back here from France and when I mentioned that you were staying with Marcus and his sister, she said she’d certainly like to meet you. Call me at your earliest convenience. ’
Always, Mark

Desiree’ held me back from giving him a quick call on my cell phone. “ He didn’t say it was urgent and adventure is our top priority for this afternoon. ”

Gustav pulled up in my driveway and I punched the button on my garage remote control. Bright sunlight streamed through the sheer ivory curtains that covered the kitchen’s glass-paned French doors. The setting was decidedly different from Castle Desiree’ and I was more than glad to be home. Selma rubbed against my legs, then purred as I carried her upstairs.

Desiree’ acted as though I’d committed a cardinal sin as she gazed into my room. “ Let me guess; you decorated this monstrosity yourself. ” The walls were sea-foam green and set back against the far end was a French mirrored armoire made of natural cherry-wood. I’d bought it at a flea market, paying a fraction of what it would have cost at a retail furniture store. I’d also purchased two silvered glass lamps for a touch of elegance. The window shades were cream colored apricot and matched the color of the four columns that doubled as my bedposts. The sheets and comforter were the color of driftwood, reminding me of my lonely life. Pictures of gardenias and orchids hung on the walls, but my favorite painting had been commissioned by marine artist J. E. Buttersworth. ‘Goddess of the Sea’ had 4 masts, miles of white rigging and an overall length of 307 feet. She was moored near Dunkirk, France, and rose in stark contrast against sunset colors of mauve, burnt orange, golden yellow, crimson red, pink, and lavender. In a separate frame below the clipper ship I’d put this quotation by Samuel Eliot Morison:

‘They flow across the oceans,

White clouds of canvas
Billowed against the sky.’

Desiree’ became solemn. “ Sailing to far away places can be both a blessing and a curse. ”

“ Do you know anything about tall ships, Desiree’? ”

“ My father owned many of them, making his fortune in goods and long-distance trade with China, Great Britain, France, and India. His commercial clippers were the fastest and most seaworthy; long, slender, and sharp-bowed, they broke dozens of speed records in the mid-nineteenth century. Although my family took many trips aboard them I was always left at home. ” She sounded disgusted. “ Are you happy, now? ”

Valera stood quietly by, then frowned. “ There’s no need to direct your anger at Nancy; she’s not the cause of your problems, but the answer. ” She smiled and laid her hands on my shoulders. “ This is the time to kneel and pay homage to the Great God Aequalis; he is the counterpart to Kermes Twa and rules the ‘Cynningdom of Bilanx’, Kingdom of Balance. Let his words flow in and out of you in a rivered prayer of harmony. ”

“ Aequalis, Great God of Balance
We fall on our knees before you and pay homage
Where the road has been straight, let it be crooked
Where it has been ice-cold, let it be fire-hot
Where there have been sweet truths, let there be bitter lies
Where there has been strength, let there be weakness
Where there has been high noon light, let there be midnight darkness
Where there has been waking openness, let there be sleeping closure
Where there has been Life, let there be Death ”

Desiree’ and I intertwined our souls in hallowed reverence as Kermes Twa and Aequalis spoke to us in a foreign tongue.

“ Twa grete deite, blenden fortis
Declaren timaleas blodbond
Betweohs innocere ond yfel
Uniten Sweostors - Heorte ond Sawol
Burdhr nama Aeternus ”

“ Desiree’, what’re they saying? ”

“ It’s a usage of Middle English, Old English and Latin. Understand forever:

‘Two great gods, blended forces
Declare timeless blood-bond
Between innocence and evil
United Sisters - Heart and Soul
Birth name Eternity’

This is their spiritual blessing for us and on us and it’s our sworn duty to honor and serve them forever. ”

“ Arise, Countess Nancy; the time has come to consume ‘Persephone’s Potion’, a drink prepared in honor of Kermes Twa and Aequalis. ” Valera led the way to bright afternoon sunlight that spilled into every corner of my kitchen.

She handed me a sparkling crystal goblet, filled to the brim with red frothiness. Desiree’ swirled the crimson liquid, then we drank every last drop. The taste was an anthemed concoction that filled me with allegiance and loyalty to the Great God and Goddess. “ Valera, this is just what I needed, but why the unusual name? ”

“ Countess Nancy, it’s loaded with vitamins and minerals for the health and nutrition that your body demands at this time; it contains bananas, wheat germ, and most importantly, pomegranates. ” Her smile was grand. “ In classical Greek mythology, Persephone was the daughter of Zeus, father of the gods. Her mother was Demeter, goddess of the earth and of agriculture. ” I sat down and listened to the rest of her story.

“ Hades was god of the Underworld. He fell madly in love with the beautiful Persephone and wished to marry her; although Zeus gave his consent, Demeter would not. ”

I thought to myself, “ This is the constant struggle between the sexes and how differently each views and perceives the same set of circumstances. ”

“ Hades seized the maiden as she gathered many beautiful blooming springtime violets, then carried her off to his underworld realm. As Demeter

wandered the universe in search of her lost daughter, the earth grew desolate; all vegetation died and famine ruled the land. At long last Zeus sent Hermes, messenger of the gods, to bring Persephone back to her heart-broken mother. Before Hades would let her go, he asked that she eat a small portion of red pomegranate seeds that he had brought especially for her. She only complied in order to be set free of him. ”

I smiled at that part of the story. “ So everything worked out all right for Persephone in the end? ”

Valera gave me a look that said the best is yet to come. “ Not quite, Countess Nancy. Hades tricked Persephone; he was a sly god who’d go to any and all lengths to get what he wanted. He failed to mention that the pomegranate seeds were the staple food of the dead and if Persephone ate them unwittingly, she’d be compelled to return to his underworld kingdom for one third of the year. ” Valera touched my hand. “ She became both goddess of the dead and goddess of earth’s springtime fertility. ”

Desiree’ weighed her words. “ Valera is a very wise woman, Nancy. You may think this is just a fairytale, but myths have a way of evolving into truth. You know that we’re bound closely together by our hearts and souls, the blood of life and death, but that’s nothing compared to what the future holds for us. ” She was gentle in her approach. “ Kermes Twa says it’s not the outside trappings that we should be worried about, but the important changes which have and will take place on the inside; you and I’ve been offered both the sacred and profane, filled with glimmers of heaven and glimpses of hell. The Balance which leads to the true pathway, the Journey leading to the growing desire of our life. ”

My scattered thoughts weren’t able to absorb or comprehend the real meanings between her lines and I sighed in frustration. “ Nancy, your problem is a common one, especially for newbie vampires. The effects of Adrian’s innocent life force have worn off, but you’ll feel splendid when your emptiness is filled by his fresh blood, warm and salty sweet. ” Adrian and I had made plans to meet for supper and Desiree’ smiled in anticipation of events that were to transpire later in the evening.

Gustav appeared. “ Ladies, where shall we begin our adventure? ” He frowned in concentration, then announced with great flair, “ I know the perfect place, guaranteed to give you the most pleasure on your shopping

spree, Countess Nancy. Angelo's Classiques! ”

“ Is this store familiar to you, Desiree’? ”

“ Of course it is, Nancy. Have you forgotten that Kermes Twa allowed me to get out and about for certain periods of time? Gustav's taken me to Angelo's on many occasions; I did have victims to impress, you know. ” Desiree' smirked in satisfaction. “ Angelo carries everything from classical to erotic designs. He even has his own line of designer clothing; sublime, feminine, sexy and daring, but all in good taste. ” She clapped our hands in glee.

Gustav, Valera and I went to the garage. Valera took the back seat, while Desiree' and I climbed into the front with Gustav. He put the Mercedes in gear and drove to the end of Foxglove Lane, then turned left onto Hawthorn Drive. In the older section of town, we passed many stately homes that had been built in the late 1700's, and early 1800's. One particular mansion caught my eye, reminding me of something I couldn't quite put my finger on. Gustav pulled into the circular driveway. “ We've arrived, Countess Nancy. ”

It stood out from all the others in style and grace, an American Gothic with a wrap around porch and extensive latticework carvings. The roof was steeply peaked with two angled bay windows under the gable. The shingled walls were painted in the light lavender shade of blooming Italian asters, with two matching golden ivory towers on each end of the structure. The front door was set in an alcove of pearlized garnet. Gustav said, “ That's Angelo's trademark; his exclusive color. ” The bell chimed to the tune of ‘Earth Angel.’ “ Angelo only accepts customers by appointment, ” Gustav explained.

The man who opened the door had salt and pepper hair, a warm smile, and a charming personality. He kissed Valera on the cheek. “ My dear woman, you haven't aged one bit; how's that lovely daughter of yours? ” He pumped Gustav's arm up and down. “ Gustav, you're a sight for my sore eyes, as most of my visitors are of the female variety; not that there's anything wrong with the fairer species, but it's grand to talk sports and cars with you. ”

Valera and Gustav gave us a bit of privacy. Angelo looked me up and down,

then barely touched the back of my hand with his lips. “ I’ve saved the best for last. ” Memories of Marcus invaded my heart and tears rolled silently down my face. “ I see that I’ve upset you, and that’s the last thing I intended to do, Lovely Lady. ”

He handed me a Kleenex and I wiped my eyes and nose. “ My emotions have gotten the better of me this afternoon. ” I took a deep breath and regained a bit of composure.

“ We have a mutual acquaintance, Angelo; Countess Desiree’ has spoken very highly of you. ”

He didn’t waste time, but questioned me. “ How is it that you know Desiree’? ”

“ My name is Nancy, and Desiree’ lives inside my heart as my sister of the night. We’re two halves of a whole, blending our spirits into one person. ” I paused as he shook his head in disbelief. “ Ask me a question that only Desiree’ would have an answer for. ” I stared into his eyes, so he could see the truth.

“ Who accompanied you on your last visit to my humble shop? ”

Desiree’s memories became my words. “ An antiques buyer named Hugo, specializing in Far Eastern collectables. ”

“ Countess. ” Angelo kissed me on both cheeks, then swept his arm in front of me and I entered his establishment. “ A million welcomes and thank you for once again gracing my home. ”

“ Angelo, I never would’ve guessed that your home was a lingerie shop. ”

“ Your lack of imagination is appalling, Ducky! ” Desiree’ had left for parts unknown, leaving me with a small niggling voice that irritated my mind, much like a single grain of sand bothered an oyster.

Angelo continued speaking. “ Not many people have access to what I sell. I have no particular need of money, so my clientele are among the most interesting and unusual people in the world. ” I followed him through an arched doorway into the next room where all his wares were displayed, from sexy, sensuous lingerie to feminine and alluring dresses. Each item was laid

out in order to catch the eye as well as the senses. “ Every piece you see has been designed exclusively by me or for me by various clothing artisans. Let me show you what I think will suit your coloring best. We’ll start from the inside and move on to the outside. ” He picked up a bra and brief set.

“ This has the retro glamour of diamond-patterned stretch lace; a lovely floral detail in pearlized blue with vanilla accents. ” Angelo pointed out the second design he had in mind. “ This matching satin bra and thong set is shimmering silver with a black lace overlay. ” He was near to bursting with pride. “ Last, but not least is my own designer collection; Future by Angelo. The camisole and matching panties are burgundy moonscape, embroidered with molten stars. ” In an aside he whispered, “ They match your personality and charm. ”

Desiree’ danced in my eyes. “ Your taste is impeccable, Angelo. I want to see your newest collection of pajamas and nightgowns; you know the style I’m accustomed to. ”

“ Style and taste is in the eye of the beholder and your lack thereof is on the smarmy side of tacky, Dearie! ” An itch I couldn’t scratch.

“ Yes, Countess Desiree’. ” She brought my mind back to what Angelo was saying. “ This gossamer chiffon gown is coppered black and adorned with velvet flocking in a delicate vine pattern. It features a sensual cowl back and scoop front neckline with a matching G-string panty. I also have this long sleeved silk lounging pajama set in sea-coral rose that comes with a cropped camisole. ”

“ Angelo, wrap them up so I can take them home! ” Suddenly, I felt quite faint and he helped me over to a black-lacquered art-deco chair with leopard skin cushions.

Intense nausea engulfed my body. “ Desiree’, what’s wrong with me? I’ve never felt this ill before in my life. ”

Angelo had one of his clerks bring me a glass of water. He held my hand and spoke in soothing tones, like a parent would to a child who’s scared and frightened. “ Nancy, just sip this so you don’t get dehydrated. Should I call a doctor for you? ”

Desiree’ didn’t have an answer to my question, but the other voice most

certainly did. “ You should do as Angelo suggests, but I don’t think you need a doctor just yet! ”

The water was pure and sweet, quenching my thirst and easing the knots in my churning stomach. “ Angelo, thank you so much. It’s been a very hectic day and maybe if I lay down for a bit I’ll be fine. ”

He led me across the hall into a Victorian Drawing Room and elation surrounded my heart. “ ‘Welcome to my parlor, said the spider to the fly.’ ” Angelo laughed. “ This is the main drawing room and the lady who designed this for me had comfort in mind, making any guests want to linger with the host. ”

The elaborate wallpaper was scrolled in small scale floral patterns; finely detailed vines and birds were set against a background of red, blue and green, overprinted with shades of cream and tan. The ceiling moldings were intricately carved and painted a lighter shade of cream, while the ceiling itself had added scrollwork decorations. The window drapes were made of brocade and matched the wallpaper perfectly. They were folded and held back with scroll shaped fitments, embellished with red tassels, blue ribbons and green festoons. Gold-gilded valances made of velvet and lace adorned their tops. In the back corner was a deep goldenrod and emerald green brocade settee. Angelo helped me sit down and lifted my feet as I leaned my back and head against the overstuffed arm. I closed my eyes to the cool dimness and was out like a lady with the vapors.

Chapter 7

Coming back from our walk to the waterfall, I saw many handsome horse-drawn carriages outside the garnet-colored front door. “ Marcus, I do believe we’re slightly late in returning to our engagement party. ”

“ Bethanie, we don’t have to be present until 7 pm. ” Marcus took out his father’s gold pocket watch and glanced at it. “ That gives us plenty of time. If we sneak around to the servant’s entrance, no one will be the wiser. ”

He grasped my wrist and we ran quickly around to the kitchen doorway, ducking inside so we wouldn't be noticed. Marcus put his finger to his lips and smiled at the help and a few of the younger girls giggled as he passed by. After we were out of earshot, I laughed until my sides ached. " Marcus, you brighten everyone's day, including mine. "

Marcus captured me in his arms, then pinned me against the door to my room. He lowered his lips to mine; the kiss was sweet, but cut short as the door opened and we fell to the floor! Regina gave us her most disapproving look and haughtily said, " I thought for sure you'd be late and your Father would blame me as usual. "

Marcus got up and gave me his hand. With a twinkle in his eye, he laid a brief peck on Regina's cheek, causing her to blush profusely. " Away with you now, Count Marcus, we have women's work to attend to. " Regina sounded harsh, but had a soft spot in her heart for my husband-to-be.

" My Love, I'll see you later. " Marcus blew me a kiss and left for his rooms.

Regina swiftly closed the door so I could bathe and dress, with no distractions. " Bethanie, why are you always late whenever you're with Marcus? " Her manner was stern, but mirthful and she tsked reprovingly as she helped me out of my wet clothes. " They look as if they went for a swim in the lake, with you not far behind. " She pointed at the tub. " Your water's been freshly drawn, and I've added your favorite lavender scent. "

" Regina, you're a dear lady and I haven't the slightest idea what I'd do without you. " My weary body wanted to soak for hours in pure delight, but I knew there wasn't time.

A cold compress was put on my forehead and I heard someone call my name. " Marcus, is that you? "

" No, Countess Nancy, it's Angelo. Are you feeling any better? "

I sighed and stretched. " Yes, Angelo, almost like I've been relaxing in a

hot-tub for hours. How long was I asleep? ”

“ For just a few minutes, My Dear. ” Angelo helped me to a sitting position.
“ Is there anything I can get for you, anything you have need of? ”

“ Desiree’, what made me faint? ” She’d retreated to a part of me I couldn’t reach.

“ Time will tell! ” That tiny voice closed the distance between us.

My thirst for Adrian’s blood quickly gained control of my thoughts; his life force to give me strength, warmth, and love. I stopped dead in my tracks and wondered where that last word had come from. I needed to find something else to concentrate on. “ Angelo, what time is it? ”

“ Going on 3 pm, Countess Nancy. Do you have another appointment to keep that will leave me bereft of your charming company? ” Angelo didn’t sound pleased.

“ Angelo, I promised to meet a very special man later on this evening, but there’s no rush. In fact, I wish you’d continue with your showing. ”

“ Only if you reveal his name to me. ” Angelo laughed in a booming voice.
“ I know many people and I might be able to give you some information as a favor for spending so much time and money here. ”

“ Desiree’, do you think I should tell him? ”

“ Nancy, I think Angelo wants to test your honesty, so he can see whether or not to trust you. ” Desiree’ was resolute in her admonition.

“ His name is Adrian, and I met him Tuesday night at a downtown club called Precious Metals. He’s the lead singer for the Brain Jumpers. ”

Angelo’s face lit up with pleasure. “ Yes, I know Adrian Connor. He and his group have entertained for some of my most important and valued customers; they find him darkly creative. ” He paused. “ Did he mention his special plans for tonight? ”

“ Not to me, he didn’t. ” Jealousy seeped into my heart. Adrian had

mentioned supper, but nothing else.

Angelo interrupted my train of thought. “ Countess Nancy, there’s no need for that suspicious look in your eyes; Adrian’s bringing you here for your evening meal. ” I gave him a questioning look as electric shocks coursed through my veins. Angelo was amused by my puzzlement. “ Don’t upset yourself with unpleasant thoughts; Adrian’s my godson. His mother was a good friend and client of mine before she passed away and I’ve been like an Uncle to him since he moved back to this area from Montana. ”

“ Desiree’ . ” Angelo’s words left me weak in body and spirit as the Hunger for Adrian’s blood blasted me with atomic force; how would I be able to assuage the horrific need that swirled throughout my every nerve cell? Needles and pins pricked at my skin, and I broke out in a cold sweat.

“ Nancy, calm down before you throw yourself into a tizzy! ” Desiree’ smiled to herself as she talked out loud to me. “ Angelo is the one who wants us to initiate Adrian into our lifestyle. ” I breathed a sigh of relief and Desiree’ continued. “ Adrian’s mother was named Lorraine. She had a real zest for living and although she loved Adrian’s father with all of her heart, she never told him she was a ‘soul of the night.’ The only person she trusted was Angelo. ” Desiree’ touched his arm. “ Lorraine was pregnant while she and Adrian’s father lived in the wilds of Montana. There was no availability of fresh innocent blood for her there, so she slowly grew weaker and weaker as time went by. Adrian’s father took her to doctor after doctor, but they could never pinpoint the reason why she was wasting away. Late one night she telephoned Angelo because she had gone into labor. ” Tears came to my eyes and overflowed down my cheeks. “ Angelo had just enough viable life force so Lorraine could deliver Adrian, but the small amount wasn’t enough to keep her alive. ” Desiree’ whispered inside my sub-conscious, “ Nancy, even Vampires can die. ”

“ Yes, Countess Nancy, all of it’s true. Lorraine specified in her last will and testament that she wanted me to be Adrian’s Uncle, even though we’re not related by blood. I lived near Adrian and his father for many years, but my business dealings were such that moving here to Springfield allowed me advanced opportunities to come in contact with clientele and merchants on a personal basis. ” He removed a picture of Adrian and himself from his wallet. They smiled as they held a long stringer of fish between them in front of Adrian’s cabin. “ His mother owned the property where he built White

Wolf Lodge and the nearest place on the map to him is Colrain. ” Angelo winked at me. “ Would you like to divulge any details about your visit there? ”

“ Angelo, a true Lady never kisses and tells. ” I grinned. “ That glint in your eyes leads me to believe that Adrian’s already given you an earful. ”

“ Of the sketchy details he can recall! ” Angelo laughed heartily. “ Gustav has kept me informed per orders of Countess Desiree’, and Lorraine would be very pleased in the way you handled Adrian with kid gloves. ”

“ Is that true, Desiree’? ”

“ It was preordained by the Great Goddess herself, for everyone’s protection. As Lorraine’s offspring, Adrian is deserving of the special treatment that only you and I can deliver to him. ” Desiree’ had all the answers.

“ Then you have no qualms about what’s going to happen to Adrian tonight, Angelo? ” I asked.

“ None whatsoever, Countess Nancy. An agreement’s been reached and the matter of taking Adrian’s life force is settled as far as I’m concerned. ” He turned his thoughts back to his showing. “ Now we must find the perfect outfit for you to wear tonight. ” He held up the first of three selected dresses. “ This first one is a crocheted twin-set slip-dress for all seasons. Beautifully detailed and exquisitely crafted by yours truly. ” He made a sweeping bow in front of me and I giggled. “ It glistens richly with delicate beading, intricately woven into the open-work stitch. The shoulder straps are made of silky satin and both pieces are finished with shimmery scalloped edging and come in colors of steel or French blue. ” He seemed lost in a world of his own making. “ My associate, Mr. Carlos has combined a luxurious mix of satin and velvet, perfect partners on this long halter dress. It’s form-fitting velvet, with satin binding detail and sports a mock turtle-neck and a thigh-high, off-center slit. Either color of chocolate or red currant would suit you, Countess Nancy. ” Angelo was definitely in his element. “ And last, but by no means least, my newest design. A long iridescent slip-dress drapes a light as air layer of lace over a slip-liner and the plunging neckline cuts a body-carved silhouette. ” He held this dress next to my body and I saw my reflection in the mirror. “ Its quintessential slim shape is dramatized with a thigh-high side slit and spaghetti straps in raspberry delight. ” His eyes were

lit with excitement. “ I’ll give you a few minutes to decide, but keep in mind that this evening will be a very special one for both you and Adrian. ”

“ Angelo, this last gown is primo perfection and I’ll wear it to your dinner party. ” Did I really say those words out loud?

“ Countess Nancy, you’ve chosen well. ” He turned to a pair of steel and silver satin stilettos on a pedestal behind him. “ My Dear, these ultra-chic shoes have ankle straps that buckle, pointed toes, and 5 inch metal heels. ” He thought for a minute. “ And to finish the outfit, these shimmery silvered stockings will massage and stimulate your pulse points every time you move. A must have on this night of endless possibilities. ” Angelo beamed in delight. “ Why don’t you do me the honor of being my overnight guest; your fainting spell has me concerned for your health and if you stay here where I can keep an eye on you, I’ll be much relieved. ”

“ Angelo, I’ll accept your offer, but only if you promise to show me the rest of your charming house and tell me its fascinating history. ” I glanced around the room. “ I’ve seen pictures and read articles, but have never been inside a real Victorian mansion before. ”

“ I’ll take you to your rooms, then. ” There was a doorway off the back parlor that opened into a mudroom and Angelo led the way up curving stairs to the second floor.

“ Desiree’...” I was forced to hold onto the railing in order to keep my balance.

“ Nancy, whatever’s the matter with you now? ” Desiree' sounded peeved. “ Just yesterday you would’ve taken these steps two at a time! ”

Her whining didn’t faze me as I plodded upstairs and sat down at the halfway point, completely exhausted.

Angelo rushed to meet me, then took my hand and helped me to my feet. “ I forgot you’re not feeling up to par. ” He cupped my elbow and we trudged to the top, turned left, then stopped at the first door on the right. He twisted the doorknob and it opened on oiled hinges, revealing an exquisitely feminine bedroom. The magnificent black wrought-iron bed was lavishly decorated with three floral medallions; a large one in the middle, and a smaller one to

each side. The medallions were black with flowers of blue, red, white, yellow, and pink, intertwined with tiny green leaves. Black throw pillows were delicately embroidered with Red Indian elephants, a fitting accompaniment to the crimson bedspread of finest Egyptian cotton. Framed emphaera hung on the ivory-colored walls and served as artwork. The window treatments were of ivory lace, trimmed with gold-braid across the bottom. A flowered needlepoint rug matched the framed emphaera. Over in the corner by the nickel-plated parlor stove was a glorious old claw-foot tub, equipped with a shower. A handsome full-length mirror was attached to the wall on the far side of the room next to the cherry-wood chest of drawers. A lace doily lay across the top of the dresser and on each end was a carved ivory elephant with its trunk in the air, holding an aqua-colored glass sconce. “ Angelo, this room befits a Queen. ”

He touched my cheek. “ Or a beautiful Countess in need of rest. ” Angelo fluffed the pillows. “ Take a nap and I’ll send Valera up to check on you in about an hour. ”

“ Angelo, I understand why Desiree’ likes you so much. You barely know me and yet you treat me like royalty. ” He leaned over and kissed my forehead, then left the room, softly closing the door behind him.

“ Desiree’, where have you disappeared to? ” I wanted to ask her about the evening’s festivities, but she’d vanished into thin air.

“ This is nothing short of a miracle, Ducky. Desiree’s not here, but I call this house my home! ” That squiggling voice lay like heavy blocks of cement on my eyelids as I drifted off to sleep.

Soaking in the lavender-scented bathwater was such bliss, soothing my senses until I weighed my conflicting thoughts and feelings about becoming engaged to and then marrying Marcus. My unsettled reflections were rudely interrupted by Regina. “ Bethanie, hurry up Girlie! You don’t want to be late to your own engagement party, now do you? That would make your Father very angry. ”

The gleam in her eyes told me a different story. “ Regina, Papa’s never had a harsh word to say to me; you know I’m the apple of his eye. ” The one thought which always brought joy to my heart was that Desiree’, my poor

twin sister, couldn't please Papa, no matter how hard or in how many ways she tried. I wanted, needed, and craved attention and always made sure that Desiree' was seen in a bad light. Yes, I certainly knew how to manipulate my Dear Papa. I had him wrapped around my little finger, which left Desiree' out in the cold to fend for herself. She had material possessions galore, but I had all of Papa's love. She was lucky to receive crumbs of kindness here and there.

“ You were always that and more. ” Regina handed me a luxurious Egyptian towel, made of the finest cotton that had come back on Papa's clipper ship, Goddess of the Sea, along with many other items. She helped me dry off, then looked me over in the way a mother would a daughter. “ Yes indeed, Marcus is a very lucky man to be marrying you. I know you'll bring him much love and joy, and many children to make yours a happy family home. ”

I put on my best smile. “ The only way to accomplish that is to get me dressed so Marcus will realize I'm the Belle of the Ball and every other woman in the world pales in comparison to me. ”

“ Bethanie, you have beauty, charm, elegance, and intelligence, plus a heart that has the capacity to truly love. ”

It was true I had everything that Regina said, but loving Marcus in the deepest sense of the word could never be as I'd already given my heart, soul, and body to another man.

Phillipe was first mate aboard Papa's clipper ship, Goddess of the Sea and I never would have been allowed to marry him, as he was beneath my social standing. Tonight would be the last chance for us to be together for the next two years and I was going to find a way to meet him in the apple orchard at midnight before he sailed on the newest clipper ship Papa had bought for trade with China. The clipper was named Sapphire Ocean and Papa had one of his trusted captains, now retired, design and carve the figurehead after me. Her graceful flowing robes were the color of sea crest spray, her wind-tossed tresses black as India ink. Her lips the color of the scarlet tanager, curved in a come hither smile, welcoming all sailors in port or on the seven seas.

“ Bethanie, wake up from your daydreaming, girl. ” Regina shook my shoulders, then handed me my undergarments. “ Please start dressing

yourself as I need to prepare your hair accessories. ” She pointed to the crisp white cotton bloomers I enjoyed wearing and the tan light-weight linen chemise that fit me like a second skin.

I slipped both of them on and studied myself in the mirror. “ Yes, ” I said to myself, “ I’ll be the central focus of everyone’s attention; a prima donna, undertaking the leading role in an operatic musical. ”

I held onto the bedpost as Regina helped me step into my elegant Barley-Gold brocade ball gown. Glimmering black sequins accented the bodice and I’d wear the sleeves low on my shoulders. That was the latest fashion rage in Paris and would give the female guests something to gossip about. Regina pulled the bodice lacing as tightly as she could, making it hard for me to breathe. “ Bethanie, have you put on weight? ” Regina huffed. “ This gown is much harder to close than it was when you were first fitted for it! ”

“ You do have a vivid imagination, Regina. ” I smiled, but knew in my heart she was right. The cause was certain, but after Marcus and I were married, it wouldn’t matter who the real father was. The dress was snug, but manageable.

I slipped the most luxurious kidskin shoes on my feet, imported all the way from Italy. “ Turn around Girlie, so I can see how you look. ” Regina’s face broke out in a huge grin. “ My, my. You look exactly like your Mother when she was eighteen. I wish she were here for your betrothal party tonight. ” Our Mother had died of break-bone fever when Desiree’ and I were ten and I missed her with all my heart. I sighed, as tears moistened my eyes. Maybe if she was still alive, my life would be different. She could’ve talked to Papa for me, and I could be with Phillipe instead of marrying Marcus.

After Mother passed away, Desiree’ went from being bad to being worse. She was actually quite beautiful after she lost a lot of weight, but was a shameless flirt with older men. We were as different as night and day, never seeing eye to eye on anything and there’d been times when I wondered how we could ever be twins, but I found the secret in our family Bible, in Mama’s own handwriting.

In the summer of our sixteenth year, Desiree’ was found in the company of one of Papa’s closest friends. The man was divorced and the furor caused Papa and me so much embarrassment, that she was banished from the house

for well over two years. She was to finish school in France and sailed there with our Uncle Joshua. The first time Papa and I knew anything about her husband, Marcus, was when he came to Springfield and told us of her untimely death. I never knew what Marcus saw in Desiree, but unfortunately he cast his eyes in my direction and asked Papa for my hand in marriage without even consulting me on the matter. Papa gave his wholehearted consent and I was to be engaged to Marcus through no fault of my own.

Regina put the finishing touches on my hair and face. The gold ribbons that adorned my raven tresses had belonged to Mama. They set off my dark curls to perfection. I needed no cosmetic enhancements for the black lashes on my emerald green eyes or to heighten the color on my naturally rosy cheeks. My lipstick was a gift from Marcus, manufactured only in Fredericksburg and in my mind's eye I pictured Phillippe kissing my soft full lips, painted with Courtly Wine. I dabbed the fragrance of Night Blooming Jasmine behind my ears and on my wrists. Phillippe had given me this particular perfume soon after we met, but when this evening was over I'd wear Lavender Love, the scent that Marcus preferred.

Regina kissed my cheek, then turned to leave. "I must go downstairs and make sure everyone's in place for the announcement, but I'll return for you in just a few minutes."

I was startled when a knock came at the door. "May I come in Countess Nancy?" The knob turned slowly and Valera walked through the doorway. "Are you feeling any better?" She touched my forehead and cheeks, then helped me sit up. "I've brought pomegranate juice to tide you over until supper."

"Valera, I'm glad you're here." I let out a huge yawn. "Even though I got some sleep, I've never felt this tired in my entire life. Do you think I might be coming down with the flu?"

"No, Countess Nancy. In the beginning stages of Vampirism, your need for fresh, innocent blood is a vital necessity. Your own blood can't give your body the nourishment it needs in order for you to feel normal. Once you feed on Adrian's life force, the tiredness and weakness will disappear." She

handed me the glass of juice and a red vitamin pill and watched as I swallowed them down.

“ Valera, you really do care about Desiree’, don't you? ”

She sighed and glanced at her watch. “ The relationship that I have with Desiree’ is both kind and loving, but it’s a long story which will have to wait for another time as you must ready yourself for supper with Adrian. I’ve brought a special blended soap for you to use in the shower. The coconut oil cleanses and purifies, the cherry oil will attract Adrian to you, and the blue rose oil honors Kermes Twa and Aequalis. ” She handed the perfumed bar to me. “ While the water runs over your body, let the ritual words flow, speaking them out loud to bind them to your heart and soul. ”

I parted the shower curtain, then stepped into the tub of steaming water, freeing my body and spirit from the day’s impurities. Coconut was the first scent to reach my nostrils, reminding me of white sandy beaches. The pleasant aroma of cherry blossoms lingered in my mind like a mid-summer’s day and the blue rose bouquet enveloped set forth a communicated libation fit for the gods.

‘Lettan the sentire of the Cacao hnutu
claensian min bodig ond gemynd
Laefen me ond suculus
Freo from gylt ond wrongdon
Ah claene pagina ond defoulen
Lettan the sentire of kerasos blostma
fyllan Adrian with desiderare
With me the Magnes lithos
to dragan him ond cepan him neah
Lettan the sentire of the Blewe Rosas
placere bathir Kermes Twa ond Aequalis
In Honor, Lufu, ond Devovere
Aeternalis Bilanx

Let the scent of the Coconut
cleanse my body and mind
Leaving me unsoiled
Free from guilt and wrongdoing
A clean page, undefiled

Let the scent of Cherry Blossoms
fill Adrian with desire
With me the magnet
to draw him and keep him near
Let the scent of the Blue Roses
please both Kermes Twa and Aequalis
In Honor, Love, and Devotion
Eternal Balance'

I drew in a deep breath and realized my life scales were unequally balanced and Valera sensed my thoughts. " You'll be restored and refreshed once you partake of Adrian's life force tonight. " I put on my underwear while she walked to the other side of the room. She came back with a small white box and laid it on the dresser, but didn't say a word about what might be in the mysterious package. " Hold your arms up. " The dress slid over my head and down my body in a perfect fit. She motioned me to the mirror and applied Black as Coal mascara to my eyelashes and Lavender Haze to my eyelids, then reddened my nails and lips with Angelo's exclusive Raspberry Dreams. " You remind me of Desiree' in so many ways. " She brushed the hair back from my face and let it fall in naturally curling waves, then kissed the top of my head. " Softer than spun cotton to the touch and black as raven feathers. " She smiled. " Adrian would be honored to have you wear this present from him tonight. " She handed me the box and I tore the bow and wrapping paper off; nestled inside on a cloud of gold tissue lay a thirty inch necklace of equal, alternating Lapis Lazuli and Carnelian stones, interspersed with four Moss Agates, two on either side. Hanging on a golden clasp from the very middle of the strand was a highly polished star-shaped stone in contrasting wave bands of light yellow, tan, brown, red, grey and black. The matching earrings were made of the same stone and shaped into crescent moons. " Countess Nancy, I've no doubts that once Adrian lays eyes on you, he'll be yours to do with as you please. "

I strapped on the 5 inch stilettos and laughed. " I hope I don't fall flat on my face in these shoes. "

" Look on the bright side, Nancy. With my spirit flowing throughout your body, there'll be no mistakes tonight. " I was relieved by Desiree's presence, but she was exasperated as I practiced a balancing act behind closed doors. " You're wasting precious time, Nancy. Can't you hear our blood screaming out for Adrian to fulfill our greatest wants and needs? "

Valera opened the door and we walked to the head of the stairs. I filled my lungs to their full capacity and slid my hand along the darkly polished mahogany railing, creating an illusion of floating on air as I slowly descended the stairs.

Adrian grinned from ear to ear as he watched from the bottom. I cleared the final step with no mishaps and received a giant bear-hug. “ Nancy, you’re as graceful as your name implies, and a ravishing beauty as well. ” He kissed my cheek and I wondered why he didn’t capture my lips in his. “ When my Uncle informed me you’d come to purchase some of his designer clothes this afternoon, I was totally surprised. I had no idea you knew anything about this place. ” He winked. “ I was going to bring you here and have you be utterly astounded and amazed by a simple country boy who earned a master’s degree in knowing what a woman of refined tastes appreciates! ” We both burst out laughing.

“ Adrian, we’ve both been caught off guard. I asked Valera, personal secretary to Count Marcus, if she knew of any exclusive shops where I could purchase a fabulous dress for this evening. She sang praises about Angelo's Classiques and Gustav drove us here. ”

“ Was it co-incidence or fate? My Uncle only advertises his business by word of mouth. ” His lips barely brushed the corner of my mouth and it took me a minute to regain my train of thought, as my body demanded more than what Adrian was giving.

“ I’ve driven through this particular neighborhood numerous times, but never in a million years would’ve guessed that Angelo’s mansion housed a clothing boutique. ”

A busy bee buzzed inside my mind. “ You’re too slow to even be my understudy. ”

I couldn’t swat that voice without being stung! “ Angelo insisted I tell him about my ‘hot date.’ ” I felt delicious tinglings in my heart. “ He wrangled your name out of me, then dropped a huge bombshell when he told me about your plans for this evening. ”

“ And they say you can never come home; well, I’ve just proved them

wrong. ” I chuckled with strange happiness as that prickly voice itched to come out in full force.

“ Nancy, it just goes to show that you and I are on intersecting paths, traveling the road together and seeing where it leads. ” He pointed his finger in the air, as if testing wind direction. “ Right now, the scintillating scent of fine food is calling my taste-buds and stomach to dinner. I hope you’re as famished as I am. ” Adrian locked his arm through mine and opened the door to the left of the staircase. The first object to catch my eye was an ornate crystal chandelier that proudly resided over a rectangular rosewood table. Blue oyster dishes and heavy gold-gilded silver-wear were casually arranged around a centerpiece of green ivy and baby’s breath. Bench-seats with checked blue and white cushions complimented the faded blue paneled walls.

That tiny wiggle wormed itself a little further into my soul. “ There might be hope for you, yet. ” Unadorned wall sconces flanked the mirror over the mantle piece and the potted marigolds, bluebells, and red carnations set around the fireplace matched the elaborate cornices. The glass-paned doors in an old cornflower blue hutch revealed many fine collectables; gold-rimmed dishware, pitchers with red hearts, whimsical figurines (graceful ballerinas, magical magicians, and white as snow swans), and ceramic roses in various shades of red.

Angelo entered the dining room from the opposite direction, walking across the glowing warmth of the polished redwood floor. I hugged him, then gave him a decent peck on his cheek. “ Angelo, this is magnificent! ”

“ Adrian, you must have read my mind when you thought of bringing me here. I feel extremely blessed in having met both of you. ” I threw my arms around his neck as a strange heat enveloped my heart and soul. He kissed me until I was breathless, then stepped back and smiled.

He fingered each particular necklace stone. “ The Petrified Sequoia gives the wearer the ability to accept whatever Life throws her way and the Lapis Lazuli is a powerful fidelity charm that encourages integrity in relationships. The Carnelian reminds one to be ‘in the moment’ and my favorite stones are the Moss Agates which are associated with abundance, balance, and self-confidence. ” Adrian gazed deep into my soul and from overhead came sounds of ocean waves and raindrops merging with piano and violins to

create a peaceful atmosphere. “ These jewels suit you to perfection. ”

Hunger pangs invaded my reverie as Angelo’s chef brought in our meal. The first sip of iced tea hinted of peaches and apricots. The tossed salad featured his own blended vinaigrette dressing, and the boiled Maine shrimp and lobster tails were accompanied with browned garlic butter for dipping. Side dishes of fresh creamed corn and stewed tomatoes stirred my appetite and my mouth watered in anticipation for the sustenance of food and Adrian’s life force to complete the evening.

While we ate, Adrian spoke about the Natural History of the Wolf. “ The Eskimo called the wolf ‘Amaguk’, and the Nez Perce named him ‘He’me.’ The Cheyenne Wolf Soldier Band, best known among wolf warriors, incorporated the grey wolf’s cunning nature and close family bonds deep into the rituals of their own clan. ”

What he said fascinated me. “ Adrian, listening to you gives me insight into who you are, and what you believe in. ”

When he lifted my hand and kissed the back of it, shivers raced down my spine. His ice-blue eyes pierced mine and Desiree’ rose to the surface. “ Now’s the time to tell you about Desiree’s name. ” Adrian’s mood was jovial. “ She can be unashamedly vain as she parades in front of a full-length mirror, deciding which drop-dead dress will stop people in their tracks. Her flamboyant behavior and enormous charisma assures her an invitation to every party, and she’s well worth the attention she demands. ” He closed his eyes for a minute. “ Her presence surrounds and infuses you now, Nancy. Apart, you’re separate entities in this world, two incomplete halves of a whole in need of blending to achieve balance. ”

“ More like trying to blend oil and water; they’ll never mix! ” The unknown philosopher tried to finagle her way to top billing.

Desiree’ was very pleased with what Adrian said. “ It took some time, but I finally came into my own and I have no intentions of losing what I’ve contributed to your life, Nancy. ”

After Desiree’s interruption, Adrian continued. “Desiree’ has many special qualities. Her perception allows her to simultaneously see the beginning and ending of any given situation. She’s compassionate and intuitive, but doesn’t

conform to ordinary patterns. Spontaneity is her keyword and she can change direction at the drop of a hat. Personal freedom tops her list and her friendships tend to gravitate towards those with artistic and bohemian persuasions. ”

“ Nancy. Desiree’ . ” Adrian breathed the duality of our names as he realized we both existed in the same vampire body. “ You’re framed in exquisite harmony; the give and take of evil darkness and innocent light. ”

“ The Great Goddess is sculpting us into her newest art form. ” Desiree’ swirled in my mind.

“ I want to have the same effect on you that you have on me. ” Adrian leaned over and crushed his lips to mine, taking no notice that we weren’t in a private room. My mouth opened wide, letting him taste and explore, while intense sensations and electric emotions coursed through my body. I knew I had to break free or risk losing myself in him.

That nimble voice shouted, “ Phillipe! ”

Adrian boldly stated, “ You can’t tell me that kiss meant nothing. I felt your whole body respond to me, as if we’d been lovers in another life! ”

“ Nancy, enough of this foolishness with Adrian. You’re not allowed to have wants and needs of a physical nature with anyone but Marcus. ” Desiree’ traveled deep into my mind where Adrian couldn’t see or hear her.

“ Adrian, I’m sorry. ” I wanted to cry, but that unknown spirit grinned from ear to ear.

“ Nancy, you can’t lie or deceive me, so there’s nothing to be sorry about. I know who and what you are by your feelings and actions. ” Adrian’s hands gripped my shoulders. “ Take me with you on your life’s chosen journey. ”

Adrian kissed me all the way to my soul and I responded with no second thoughts to mar the way. “ Phillipe, my one and only love! ” She gloated in triumph.

He pulled me up with him and pressed his body close to mine. “ Give yourself to me! ” My knees grew weak as his kisses burned like wildfire. and

every cell wanted to feel the power of his blazing love. Adrian's mouth moved to my neck; kissing, licking, and sucking in wild abandon, an adrenaline rush pushing me to the brink of disaster.

Seconds before he bit down on my pulse point, Desiree' screamed, then shoved him away before he had the chance to taste my life force. His glazed-over eyes slowly cleared. " Good God, this isn't like any love I've ever experienced before. " Adrian was very upset with himself. " Please forgive me Nancy. "

I backed up a few more steps, then folded my arms across my chest to protect myself. " Adrian, you're moving way too fast for me. I haven't had much experience in being a Vampire and even the mere taste of my blood could result in serious complications and repercussions for both of us. "

Angelo put his two cents worth into the conversation. " She's right, Adrian, there's plenty of time for everything. "

Adrian took a seat at one end of the bench and I sat as far away from him as I could. He scowled in my direction. " You're forgiven, Adrian. " I smiled and hoped things would get back to normal.

" Nancy, if that's true, please sit beside me again. I promise I won't bite. " I scooted closer to him, feeling more in control of the situation.

The chef carted in our dessert. " And the piece de resistance is a richer than sin Heavenly Key Lime Cheesecake! "

Angelo lifted a fork-full to his mouth and sighed. " Ah, sheer perfection. When we're finished, we'll walk off our calories in my downstairs cellar, a collector's dream I had built to my precise specifications. " In a stage whisper he added, " It's an exact replica of an 18th century Parisian dungeon. "

" A history lesson in the making for me perhaps? " Anything to keep my mind off of Adrian and his delicious kisses that spelled danger with a capital 'D.' " What do you think, Desiree'? " She didn't answer, but I was sure she'd approve.

Adrian gathered my hand in his, and we walked to the cellar door.

Chapter 8

Angelo switched on overhead lights that scarcely illuminated the downward steps to the dungeon. “ The darkness is meant to make a specific impression. What you’ll see are humanlike figures in wax, visual arrangements making the scenes more real and believable. I’ll light up the torture devices one at a time and explain how they were used. ”

Adrian’s grip tightened. “ Nancy, you’re under no obligation to do this. If you don’t feel up to it, we can leave right now, no questions asked. ”

“ I’m not afraid, Angelo. Lead on. ” We descended into spiraling dimness.

The first display was a woman whose nose and mouth were bright red. “ This is the ‘Blooding Ritual.’ It was once commonly believed that a witch’s power could be nullified by bloodletting and then burning her blood. Convicted witches were ‘scored above the breath,’ slashed over the nose and mouth and allowed to freely bleed. ” Angelo stared directly at me. “ Some of them met their death in this manner. ”

Something in the back of my mind stirred. Was it an echo of memories best forgotten? “ Nancy, are you sure you want to see the rest of my Uncle’s collection? ”

I’d all but forgotten Adrian, who was pale of face and trembling with agitation. “ Nancy will be all right. ” Did Angelo have foreknowledge of events to come? “ This next device is The Branks, or Scold’s Bridle which originated in Scotland in the 16th century and passed from there to England and thence to the Americas. ” The scene featured a man and woman both dressed in Pilgrim’s clothing. The chain around her neck was attached to an iron mask over her face and head and he was parading her through the city square.

“ This metal gag was principally used on scolding housewives, typically fashioned as a cage that locked onto the head and aided by a metal protrusion that fit into the mouth. Many times a tongue piece was enhanced with spikes to discourage speaking and some also had chains attached to secure the wearer in public places. ” Again Angelo seemed to be appraising

me with an eagle eye. “ They were also used to silence witches in order to prevent them from chanting or reciting their magic spells. ”

Adrian’s movements spoke volumes of uneasiness and I fidgeted nervously with my watch. Desiree’ chirped, “ Adrian’s overflow of fresh blood can hear your body staking out its claim on his life force. Your screaming need has overwhelmed him to say the least. ”

“ I think Adrian needs a time out. ” A well-concealed door was hidden in the back corner of the cellar and Angelo opened it to reveal a brightly lit parlor area. He smiled and handed Adrian a tumbler filled with yellow liquid.

“ Drink up. ” When the glass was drained, Adrian plopped down on a floral overstuffed couch and fell fast asleep, snoring gently into the back cushions. Desiree’ and I knelt beside him and drew his engorged jugular vein into our eagerly waiting mouth. We clamped down hard and his gushing fountain of blood circulated soothing sensations within our heart and soul. After we released our fangs from Adrian’s throbbing neck, his smile declared we were right in taking what he freely offered. Valera had supplied a poultice of aloe and amaranth to staunch the flow of blood and Angelo applied it to his wound.

The same clipper ship that hung on my bedroom wall was pictured in Adrian’s mind, followed by places that seemed familiar; a small chapel surrounded by flowers and a lake called Farrah Rose. “ Does Adrian have a connection to your past, Desiree’? ”

“ Nancy, why are you boring me with silly details that serve no purpose? What’s in the past should stay dead and buried as it has no bearing on me, you, or our life now. ”

The stranger within my head whispered, “ She’s right, Ducky. Desiree’s past is long gone, but mine is right here, right now, and will definitely be part of my future! ” She exited stage right in a cloud of Night Blooming Jasmine.

“ Nancy, would you like to see some more of the Dungeon? ” Angelo knew I wasn’t about to refuse his offer. “ While Adrian recuperates, I’d be more than happy to show you and Desiree’ the rest of the torture devices. ” He didn’t wait for a reply, but opened the door that led to the cellar. My attention was drawn to a circular spotlight. “ These shackles and chains weren’t used so much for torture, but as a means to degrade and berate. The

woman depicted here is suffering ‘Tormentum Insomniae’ or torture by sleeplessness. ” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “ Perhaps it was allowed because there wasn’t any physical pain involved. ”

I bent down to get a closer look at the woman and saw raw bite marks on her neck. She was thin as a rail and dressed in the tattered rags of beggar’s clothing. Her long black hair hung in lifeless knots from her dirty head and her translucent skin was whiter than fresh fallen snow. Her shoeless feet were swollen, red and blistered as if she’d walked many miles underneath a hot, blazing sun. The pitiful sound of, “ Help me, help me, ” fell from her ice blue lips. Desiree’s emerald-green eyes pierced my heart.

My eyelids opened to the surprising vision of a beautiful woman standing over me. She was dressed modestly in black, as befitted her station in life. “ My name is Valera and I’ve paid your debts to the King’s government and made restitution to what society says you owe. ” Her demeanor was cool and calm. “ You’ll repay me in full by joining my religious order. ” She beckoned and the jailer removed the heavy chains and shackles that had held me prisoner for many days. “ Gustav, please carry her out to the carriage. ” The man who accompanied her picked me up gently, then wrapped me in warm blankets as if I was breakable porcelain. He swiftly took me to a splendid horse-drawn vehicle and laid me on a soft leather seat.

Valera wiped away my tears with a rose-scented handkerchief. “ Everything will be all right now, Desiree’. ” She touched my cheek. “ You’ll be protected until you regain your strength. ”

“ How did you know my name? ” I had no clear memories of life before prison.

“ My daughter Cecelia was prompted by the Great Goddess to tell me where I’d find you and what shape you’d be in. ” Valera gathered my hand in hers. “ We’ve offered prayers of thanksgiving to Kermes Twa and soon you’ll become her willing servant, having a full understanding of her ways and truths. ”

Her voice soothed me and I fell into a deep blessed sleep with no dreams or nightmares to disturb my peace. My eyes penetrated the darkness when a

soft rustling noise and the faint scent of roses came from the foot of my bed. I tried to sit up, but lacked the energy. A cup was pressed against my lips and my thirst was slaked in learning, worship, and adoration. “ Desiree’, I’m the Great Goddess Kermes Twa. ” The strange voice floated in my veins as harsh memories of unspeakable acts infused my mind. “ The Universe always strives to maintain a perfect balance and you’ll be its trusty key to revenge and retribution, inflicting final punishment on all who’ve wronged you. ” Her red rage held me spellbound.

“ Gustav, bring more blood! ” His footsteps echoed down the hall.

I drank sweet nectar of the gods and at long last the excruciating hunger within the pit of my stomach abated. “ I’m the answer to the test of your life, Desiree’. ” Kermes Twa was jubilant. “ In one week a party will be held in your honor, marking your entrance into Parisian High Society. You’ll be the Rose Queen, having your special choice of men to dance with and drink from. ”

“ I’m a married woman! ” The Great Goddess didn’t seem particularly interested by the heaviness of my unspeakable burdens.

“ Your precious Marcus certainly isn’t here in Paris, searching the highways and byways for you. ” Her smile said something worse was forthcoming. “ He went to offer his condolences to your father and sister, and once he cast his eyes on Bethanie...”

She snickered and I screamed in frustration at life’s cruel joke. “ How long was I in that unholy prison? ”

“ Length of time is of no consequence now that Marcus has had you declared legally dead, but rest assured he’ll pay dearly for his lack of faith, trust, patience, and love. ”

Valera pulled the blankets up to my chin. “ Drink this last goblet of nectared nourishment so your thoughts and judgments will no longer be clouded with emotional feelings that leave you bewildered and confused. ” I drifted off to sleep, as all concerns and memories faded.

The voice reached across a great distance and faintly called my name.
“ Nancy, you’ll remember everything as Kermes Twa allows, but now you must return to your own reality. ” I was back in Angelo’s guestroom; Valera sat by my side, gently rubbing my forehead, cheeks and wrists with a cool washcloth.

Desiree’ spoke. “ Kermes Twa and Aequalis have bestowed a paramount privilege on us, given to no one else before. As sisters of the heart, we’re honor-bound by more than meets the eye. The need to know rests heavy in your heart, just as the need to tell weighs heavy in my soul. Let their song of balanced praise arise in our breast.

‘Origyne of lif ond lufu
Death ond hatian
Thohts ond reri
Neod to cnawan
Neod to tellan
Materia of rememorari
Materia of forgietanfulness
Min perceptio
Eower perceptio
Aeghwilc aspicere of treowth
Aeghwilc aspicere of leogan
Sceadu of hwit
Sceadu of blak
Blenden intro sceadu of graeg
Bilanx hwilc exsistere for eall’

Origins of life and love
Death and hate
Thoughts and reasons
Need to know
Need to tell
Matters of remembrance
Matters of forgetfulness
My perception
Your perception
What we think is truth
What we think is lies

White aspects
Black aspects
Blending into shades of grey
The balance which exists for all ”

“ The hour grows late. Rest is needed so your body and mind can recover from feeling the aftermath of Desiree’s sufferings and thus be able to accept the new vision of your life’s destiny. ” Valera offered motherly advice.

“ But I’m not tired. ” Desiree’ and Valera didn’t believe I had the stamina to keep going for hours on end. I was bursting with energy and swung my feet over the side of the bed, fully intending to stand up and be on my merry way, but the minute my toes touched the floor, I was in for a rude awakening. The blood high effects had worn off, leaving me weak and on edge.

“ The fresh sweetness of Adrian’s life force will sustain and nurture you. ” Valera clasped my fingers around the goblet’s stem and I drank it all, then closed my eyes as tranquil dread lulled me into a fitful sleep.

There was a light rapping at the door and I opened it, startled to see my beloved Phillipe. Only a few minutes had passed since Sheridan had delivered his handwritten note asking me to meet him in the apple orchard at midnight. He slipped quietly inside and gathered me in his arms for a hungry kiss, leaving me breathless with desire. “ Phillipe, you shouldn’t have come. What if Regina, or heaven forbid, Marcus had seen you? ” I was angry, but overjoyed and thought back six weeks to December 14th, the day I’d surrendered my heart, soul, and virginity to him. I hadn’t received a single word during that time and feared he didn’t love me anymore and to further complicate matters, I was almost certain I was pregnant with his baby.

“ Bethanie, my heart and body wouldn’t let me wait. The fact of the matter is no one saw me as they’re too busy with guests! ” He laughed, then captured my lips for another dangerous kiss and my heart burst with love and contentment. “ Many things have changed and I’ll no longer be sailing with your Uncle Joshua. ” He looked me directly in the eye. “ My Darling, you’re the most important person in my life and I want to marry you as soon as possible. ” Phillipe hugged me tight and I felt at home in his arms. “ I want

you to travel with me to San Francisco, where I'm employed as a naval architect. ”

“ Phillipe, I'd follow you to the ends of the earth. ” Happiness spread throughout my heart and soul for the first time in ages.

From the other side of the door I heard Regina call out, “ Are you ready to become engaged, Bethanie? ” The doorknob rattled. “ Girlie? ”

“ Just a minute, Regina. ”

Phillipe whispered softly and sweetly, “ I love you, Bethanie; don't forget our midnight meeting. ” He escaped through my open window to the ground below.

When I unlocked the door, Regina stared at my face and I was sure she knew about Phillipe and me. “ Your eyes are sparkling, and your face is flushed and glowing. Marcus will fall in love with you all over again. ” She oohed and aahed for a few minutes, then took my hand in hers. “ You do both of your parents proud. I only wish your Mother was here to see you, Bethanie. ” She walked me to the top of the stairs, then stepped behind me. I descended the steps with grace and elegance, hearing family, friends, and guests applaud and cheer for an event which would never take place. Marcus stood on the next to last step and held out his hands. I threw my arms around his neck and pressed my lips to his, playing the part of loving fiancée to the hilt.

Papa clapped his hands for attention and motioned for everyone to follow him to the ballroom. “ My dear friends and guests. Tonight it gives me great joy to announce the betrothal of my beautiful daughter, Bethanie, to Count Marcus of Fredericksburg. I know that each of you has already received an engraved invitation to their wedding ceremony and reception on Valentine's Day. ” Papa kissed me on the cheek and raised his goblet of blackberry wine. “ A toast to the bride and groom to be. ”

Marcus and I clinked glasses, then intertwined our arms and drained them. Another round was poured and he looked me straight in the eye as he spoke. “ I give my heart and soul to the love of my life, my wife-to-be, Bethanie. ” He held up a one-of-a-kind gold band ring with rose organza rubies that surrounded a pearl of purest white. “ Red is for the passion of my love and

white for the virginal purity of my Bethanie, undefiled and untouched by any man. ” We drank to the last drop. “ We’ll be together for eternity and beyond. ”

Although we looked to be the perfect couple, that would only last a few more hours. Soon I’d be spending all my evenings with Phillipe, laughing with Phillipe, and making sweet passionate love to Phillipe. Tears of elation welled in my eyes and I smiled for the world of my family and friends, letting everyone believe that marrying Marcus would make me the happiest woman alive.

Marcus and I danced to the strains of ‘Valse Romantique’ by Claude Debussy, then the quartet played my Mother's favorite song, ‘The Blue Danube Waltz.’ Papa tapped him on the shoulder, then whirled me around the ballroom floor. “ Bethanie, how you remind me of your mother on the night we became engaged. ” He sighed and I knew he missed her as much as I did. “ I hope you and Marcus won’t make me wait too long to become a grandfather. ”

“ Oh, Papa. ” The stage had been set to perfection as my cheeks blushed bright red. Grandchildren might be coming sooner than he expected, but they wouldn’t belong to Marcus.

The head waiter rang his bell and Papa announced, “ Dinner is served! Please follow me to the dining room. ” With Papa on one side and Marcus on the other, we walked to the head of the table, where Papa sat in his customary place of honor. Marcus sat to the left of him and I sat to the right, directly across from Marcus. Tables were set with all manner of food. Roast beef, ducklings in orange sauce, honey glazed hams, fried chickens, baked turkeys stuffed with sausage, chestnuts and apples, thick potato slices with rich brown gravy, boiled corn on the cob, candied yams, pole beans seasoned with bacon, poached pears, pecan, blueberry, and apple pies, and fruit cakes; so much food, my stomach started to churn.

I barely picked at my favorite dishes and asked for a glass of water to soothe the butterflies within my belly. “ Bethanie, is something wrong? ” Marcus seemed concerned, as I usually ate with gusto and drank sweet red wine instead of water.

“ Marcus, this is the most wonderful night in my life, but I’m afraid the

excitement has made me feel slightly ill. ” He explained how I felt to Papa, then took my hand and we slowly walked upstairs with Regina following close behind.

I sat on my bed and Regina fussed over me like I was a young girl. She laid a hand across my forehead. “ Girlie, you feel quite warm. ”

“ Regina, help me remove my dress so I can lay down for a while. ”

Marcus kissed my forehead, then Regina shooed him out of the room. “ I’ll check on you later, my Love. ” He blew me a parting kiss and closed the door behind him.

“ Bethanie, tell me what’s really going on. Are you having second thoughts about being married to Marcus? ” An interrogation if there ever was one.

“ None whatsoever, Regina. ” She undid the whalebone stays on my dress and I laughed. “ I feel better already now that I can breathe again. ” She kissed my cheek and I smiled. “ I love you, Regina. You’ve been like a mother to me. ”

She patted my hand. “ I’ll come back in a short while, Bethanie. ” Her dress rustled as she moved to the door and her footsteps echoed down the hallway until there was silence. I got out of bed, went to the back corner of my closet and opened a plain wooden chest. Underneath old baby clothes and toys was a black masculine outfit that Phillipe had given to me. I put on the pants and shirt, then tiptoed to the mud room and slipped out the side door, hugging the house shadows. I rounded the last corner and my feet flew swift and sure on the path to the apple orchard, the trees still bare with winter’s chill. My heart overflowed with desire and love for Phillipe, and I pictured him in the faint moonlight, waiting for me.

My room was bathed in pale moonlight and Adrian stood over me, a worried frown on his face. His kiss left me breathless with intense emotions, but Desiree’s mind clashed against the will of my body. “ Stop your foolishness, this instant! ” She ranted and raved. “ You’re going to ruin all the best laid plans of Kermes Twa to keep...”

Silence reigned supreme as my body responded to him in ways I couldn't comprehend. I resolved to push him away from my heart and soul, but that notion failed when the unknown voice stated in triumphant merriment, "Desiree's not here with you, but I am!" Adrian's kiss was charged with electricity, a current of sensational pinpricks pouring through my veins. I felt his hands on my face, touching and caressing as if he couldn't believe I was real.

"Bethanie, my Darling." There were tears in his eyes.

I spoke in words I had no intention of saying. "Yes, Phillipe. I've waited a life time to be with you again. Make love to me." My arms were thrown around his neck and a fevered longing took control as his hands traveled all over my body. "Don't ever let me go, Phillipe. I love you," she murmured with my lips.

Confusion reigned in my mind as I woke from realistic dreams of sharing my body and love with Adrian. Valera sat by my bed and crooned a lullaby, smoothing my brow as she sang.

'Hush my love, my darling one
There are no more tears to cry
The stars of night are yours alone
Their brightness sings your lullaby

The moon shines down in shades of gold
Don't be afraid of changes taking place
The Goddess Great her thoughts unfold
She gives you pleasure in her Grace'

"Valera, what's happening to me? I don't feel at all like myself."

She sighed. "The Great Goddess has imparted her sentiments to me; with Adrian's blood flowing in your veins, your understanding of Bethanie and Desiree' will be revealed entirely as she deems fit." She tenderly held my hand. "Your dreams of Adrian are puzzle pieces that must be resolved."

“ Valera, what day is this? I’ve lost track of time. ” There was no division to separate the hours and days that flowed into one another.

“ Nancy, it’s barely past midnight, Thursday morning. ” Dark circles underlined her eyes. “ Marcus has need of your fresh blood and without it, he grows weaker by the minute, giving up on hopes and dreams that lie hidden within his heart and soul for a future you’ll share with him. Your mission is to return to Castle Desiree’ . ” She was adamant.

I shut my eyes, willing my scattered thoughts to cohesiveness. “ Marcus has hurt me to the quick, only wanting to be with his precious Bethanie. ” My heart plunged to the floor as I remembered his actions to bring her back. “ I don’t think I matter much to him as me. ”

“ You’re wrong about that, Nancy. What Marcus feels is genuine love for you. ” Valera paused at the door. “ It’s your choice entirely though. ”

I was considering my options when Kermes Twa intervened on Marcus’s behalf. “ Your destiny will never be revealed unless you return to Marcus today. Go to him, Nancy. See, feel, taste, touch, and hear for yourself. His actions and reactions will be proof positive. ”

Valera returned to my room as Kermes Twa left. “ What time should I be ready to go, Valera? ”

Desiree’ exploded with excitement. “ Nancy, to be back at my castle with Marcus is music to my ears! ”

Kermes Twa whispered, “ Nancy, even Desiree’ has love in her heart for Marcus and I know that’s what you feel for him, also. ”

“ I’ll wake you at 8 am. ” Valera handed me a cup of lime blossom tea.

I drank its tart sweetness and fell asleep with visions of Castle Desiree’ dancing in my head. A knock at the door woke me and I felt refreshed after a night with no dreams. Angelo poked his head in. “ Good morning, Countess Nancy. I hope you’re feeling better than you did yesterday? ”

He swung the door open wide and Valera swept through, bringing me a fruit platter and a milk and wheat-germ shake on a silver tray. I was quite hungry,

and ate and drank until I was filled with contentment.

That's when the still small voice made a grand entrance. "If you return to that wretched dwelling, I'll send your soul packing." I shook my head from side to side, but hellish laughter permeated my entire being. "Getting rid of me in one fell swoop is no easy task!"

"Countess Nancy, what's wrong?" Angelo held me close and I immediately calmed down.

"Just trying to clear the cobwebs from my mind." They were eerily draped in every corner, nook and cranny.

The voice was soon forgotten as Desiree spoke reverently. "Nancy, I know you've been upset and confused about your feelings for Marcus, but returning to my castle is the dream that Kermes Twa says is right for you and me." Her smile lit up my heart as she dug deep into her soul's storehouse.

"I was privileged with the best time of my life when Marcus and I first married. The joy and love I felt for him transcends any other emotions I've ever had, but it faded and died when I was forced to remain in prison with no protection and no hope of rescue from my tormentors. I would have rotted away in that miserable hellhole if not for the mercy of Kermes Twa and Valera. They saved me physically and spiritually, showing me the way to eternal life. Under their guidance and direction we'll be happy and complete," and in a whisper that floated on the wind, "and forever loved."

Desiree's words motivated me and I sat up in bed. "Angelo, I'm feeling back to normal."

I uttered the words too soon as the unmistakable scent of Night Blooming Jasmine filled my senses. "Ducky, it's gotten to the point where you wouldn't know normal if it came up and shoved you off a cliff into the wild blue yonder!" A prima donna whose acting abilities were guaranteed to keep me waiting in the wings.

I gathered my wits. "I've had a wonderful time being your guest, Angelo. Thank you for the marvelous dinner last night and the grand tour." I gave him a peck on his cheek. "I need to talk to Adrian before I leave."

Angelo was polite, but cool. “ I’m very pleased that you’ve visited my humble home, but Adrian’s still resting from last night’s festivities. I’ll make sure he knows the reason for your departure to Castle Desiree’ . ” My heart lurched in horror as intense feelings for Adrian stirred inside my soul. Even though I wanted a future with Marcus, the danger of a relationship with Adrian beckoned. “ My nephew will be staying here for the next few days and if you wish to contact him, here’s my private number. ” He slipped a piece of paper into my palm and I heard his footsteps echo down the hallway.

Gustav appeared at my door. “ Your bags are all packed, Countess Nancy. We’ll leave for Castle Desiree’ whenever you’re dressed and ready to go. ”

“ Thank you Gustav, I won’t be too long. ” He left and Valera closed the door.

“ Valera, I don’t know which way to turn. ” My thoughts reverted back to the frightened little girl who was raised in the orphanage.

“ Countess Nancy, focus on breathing. ” I took a deep relaxing breath, then Valera clasped a pure gold bracelet around my wrist; hanging from its center was a black-mirrored, flat teardrop amulet. I gazed at my reflection. “ That’s good. Now turn it over. ” I expected to see nothing more than my features again, but Marcus stared back at me. He looked forlorn, a man deprived of everything near and dear to him and I felt like weeping on the spot, wanting to relieve him of all his misery.

“ Nancy, the obsidian doesn’t lie when it comes to the truth of feelings. You’ll always be able to see your face on one side and the countenance of your beloved on the other. ” While I dressed in a cashmere sweater and long wool pants, Valera continued. “ This black stone was purified in volcanic fires by the rapid cooling of molten lava and signifies the Fire Sign of Sagittarius, a ‘Protector’ for those who wear it. It’s favored by Kermes Twa for its access to many dimensions of Soul Retrieval. ”

We walked downstairs and Angelo waited at the door for us. He took my hand in his, kissed me warmly on the cheek, then looked me straight in the eye. “ Countess Nancy, do come back and see me. ” He was gone in an instant, but not before sliding another note into my palm.

I climbed into the back seat of the Mercedes for privacy, while Valera sat in front with Gustav. The square piece of paper read like an omen from a fortune cookie.

‘Guard against taking reckless chances by believing that new beginnings will solve all your problems. Your past presents various opportunities to discover your future.’ I wondered what it meant.

I didn’t recognize any landmarks when Gustav pulled off the main highway into a small strip mall parking lot. He got out and lifted the car-hood.

“ Something seems to be wrong with the motor, Countess Nancy. Why don’t you and Valera do a little window shopping and I’ll come get you when I’m finished. ” One store in particular caught my eye; Ye Eald Bok Sceoppa.

A silver bell jangled overhead as Valera and I entered a store which was crammed from floor to ceiling with numerous books on various topics. An older gentleman with white bushy hair walked towards us from a back room. “ Good day, Ladies. ” His smile was bright and friendly. “ My name is Carl Simmons and I’m the proprietor of this fine establishment. Do you know why people like books? ” He gave us no chance to answer, but continued talking. “ Books are like family and good friends. We feel comfortable in the presence of stories told and lessons taught. ” He removed his glasses.

I laughed. “ Mr. Simmons, it’s been quite some time since I’ve had the pleasure of reading just for reading’s sake. I noticed the sign over your doorway. What does it mean? ”

“ ‘Ye Old Book Store.’ It’s taken from Middle English and if nothing else, it attracts customers. ” He beamed.

“ Now tell me, what type of stories do you enjoy? ”

“ I’m mainly interested in family histories and diaries. ” I always hoped to discover something about my past.

He grinned. “ This way, Ladies. ” The first section focused on famous and noteworthy people, but none of the titles intrigued me enough to remove them from the shelf. “ These aren’t exactly what you were talking about, were they? ” Mr. Simmons spoke in a hushed whisper. “ I do have a private collection I’d like to show you. ” We followed him to a large office. “ I’ve traveled to many antique auctions and have been fortunate enough to pick up personal belongings and novelties for a mere pittance. ” Tucked away in the

corner was an old steamer trunk with the initials ADA inscribed in gold lettering on the side. “ I’ve glanced through the items and although they’re nice, they’re not my usual fare. Maybe you’d consider taking it off my hands for \$100? ”

Valera didn’t hesitate, but handed him a crisp \$100 bill and he hauled it out to the car. Gustav unlocked the luggage compartment and I asked Valera if she knew what was inside the trunk. “ No more so than you do, but I’ve never been one to pass up a gift horse, so to speak. ” Her eyes twinkled.

Desiree’ piped up. “ Nancy, this trunk will supply both of us with many answers, if it belongs to who I think it does. ”

I wanted to plunge into the hidden articles, but Valera quashed that idea. “ Sher’s expecting you for lunch, and you don’t want to disappoint her, now do you? ”

Gustav slammed the hood and we were on our way. The landscape changed into familiar territory and uneasy excitement took my breath away when the castle came into view. Would Marcus still want to see me? Desiree’ was ecstatic. “ Stop being a whining ninny, Nancy. Marcus will be overjoyed at your arrival. ”

“ Too bad that others think your appearance puts a damper on their activities. ” That backwater voice couldn’t hold her peace as Sher stood at the front-door entrance with a huge smile on her lips. “ That smile is so frozen you’d need an ice pick to remove it! ” How do you gag thin air?

Sher wrapped her arms around me in a crushing bear-hug. “ Nancy, we’re all so pleased that you’ve decided to return. ” She reminded me of an animated cartoon character. “ Life hasn’t been the same since you left. ”

“ I can’t tell you how much I’ve have missed Castle Desiree’ in the short time I’ve been gone. Thanks for the warm welcome. ”

Sher draped her arm around my shoulders and we walked inside. “ Let me take your jacket and we’ll chat over lunch in the kitchen. Cook has made a simple meal of tuna-fish sandwiches, fresh veggies, and herbal tea. ”

We sat down in a cozy area near the glass-paned French doors where the sun splashed diamond-light facets on the floor and walls. “ Sher, this is a beautiful spot. ” I wanted to see Marcus smiling at me from across the table, but that thought scared me to death. “ How’s Marcus doing? ”

“ He’s confused and quite angry because he thinks true love has eluded him all his life. ”

“ Except Miss Sher believes he can find it right underneath his nose, and I’m not talking about you, Ducky! ” Were those words truth or lies?

“ When Desiree’ came back she had changed so much, he didn’t recognize or want the kind of love she offered and Bethanie is the Love he thought would last a lifetime. ” Sher continued her spiel. “ Now you, on the other hand, have given him a reason to live again. ”

“ She knows how to keep you off-guard. ” I heard howls of delight in my mind. “ Sher is quite certain that Marcus doesn’t feel any love for you, but has his own agenda; to use you, then toss you away after you’ve served your purpose. ” That voice dared me to come a little bit closer. “ She might accomplish that feat in the coming days and then have Marcus all to herself and I’ll give you one guess as to who’ll be in charge of your body. ” I wanted to ask what she was babbling about, but was left to face the audition alone.

I decided that honesty was the best policy as conflicting emotions danced like a three-ring circus inside my head; did Marcus really love me or was I just a substitute for his precious Bethanie? I pursed my lips.

“ Sher, I’m taking my life one day at a time. ”

“ Would you like to take a walk around the grounds after we eat? ” She stared out the door. “ It’s such a beautiful day and there are lots of nature trails we can explore. ”

“ Just beware of snares and traps that are set in plain sight. ” Her breath was a thin vapor in the wind, and I almost caught her name.

As the dishes were cleared away, Sher told the cook we’d return before dinner. The path began at the edge of the pine trees and holly bushes.

“ These are called Dragon Lady Holly and are favored by Hella Dracon, the

Imperial Goddess. The blood of her living sacrifices adorns these bushes. ” Sher had a fevered expression in her eyes as she fingered the bright red berries. I was going to ask if they were her favorites, but she began pointing out other holly breeds; sky pencil, dark purple halla, and September gem. The forest was alive with sounds of Mother Nature until we arrived at a grove of green-leaved oak trees. Wild mistletoe decorated the towering tree branches which cast shadows over a large spring of cold clear water. We sat down on a bench carved from natural stone and Sher grasped my hand in a vice-like grip. “ I’m pleading with you to stay and let Marcus prove his love for you is real. ” Her voice dripped sincerity and mere inches separated her mouth from my ear. “ I’ll let you in on a little secret; we’re already related by blood and marrying my brother can only make our sister-in-law relationship that much stronger. ” I was bewildered by that statement. “ Let me clarify this for you; when Desiree’ turned Marcus into a vampire, she changed my life as well. One spring evening he helped me retrieve a special scarf that had gotten tangled in the hedgerow thicket. He ended up with deep scratches on his hands and used that scarf to wipe away his tainted blood. ” Shapes darkened considerably as the sun faded in the west. “ Some of that blood transferred itself to me and suffice it to say I became a vampire in the process. Marcus has never forgiven himself for turning me into what he is. ” She sighed. “ He’s supplied me with just enough of your life force so I can live as long as he does. ”

Desiree’ surfaced. “ Even though you’re becoming wise in some areas, beware of lies hidden in partial truth. ” Another riddle for me to solve.

“ If you can cure Marcus with your innocent blood, then you can certainly cure me. ” Sher sobbed and carried on, but in sudden clarity I only saw tears of the crocodile persuasion. Twilight slowly replaced blue sky and the air held a sudden chill. Sher regained her composure. “ We must return to the castle before Marcus wakes. ”

Sher was soon out of sight, but I lingered in the cool forest air and focused on my conflicting feelings. Desiree’s laugh wasn’t harsh. “ Nancy, you think too much. ‘Hwaet aefre welken beon, welken beon.’ Whatever will be, will be. ”

Stars were just beginning to emerge when I reached the castle and made my way to the room I shared with Marcus. He was no where in sight, so I hastily climbed into the shower and let the steaming spray pound my head. I soaped

and rinsed, finishing in record time as I didn't relish the thought of being late to dinner. Water dripped in my eyes and I was surprised when a towel was placed in my hands. "Thank you, Valera; or is that CeCe?" I patted my face.

A male voice said, "You're wrong on both counts, My Dear."

Marcus stood directly in front of me and I blushed profusely. "I was going to dress and be down to dinner shortly."

Without asking, without hesitation, he relieved me of the towel and dropped it beside him, then locked his eyes on mine. "I hear your blood calling me to feast on you."

His fangs glistened and he sank his pearly teeth into my flesh, as exquisite pain mixed with equal parts of pleasure coursed throughout my system. "Marcus, I love you," I murmured as I held his head against my breast, never wanting him to leave.

He consumed more and more of my life force, causing my knees to grow weaker and weaker. I fainted dead away in his embrace and eventually came to in his bed. "I think I'll keep you this way for a while, My Darling Nancy." His smile was cruel as he continued his bloodlust feeding frenzy. "I damned myself by letting you go the first time around, but I'll make certain you won't be leaving me ever again." His words were calculated to strike fear in my heart, but they thrilled me to no end. "Don't you know how much I love you?" My vision was out of focus; were there tears in his eyes?

My teeth chattered and I shivered uncontrollably. "Marcus, please hold me. I need your body heat to chase away the cold and fill the emptiness inside."

He held me tenderly in his arms and his breath warmed my neck. "I only want what's best for you," he whispered softly and I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 9

Late Thursday Evening

Someone shook my legs, rousing me from a restful sleep. “ Countess Nancy, Kermes Twa and Aequalis require your presence at their Holy Shrine. ” A hazy figure stood near the end of my bed and handed me clothes and boots. “ Their Annual Winter Union Feast Day begins at midnight and you’ll worship and offer homage to them at their sacred well. ”

I got up and swayed back and forth while my head spun in dizzying circles. A strong hand steadied my shoulder, then applied something cool and sticky to the ‘M’ on my breast. “ Open your mouth. ” I tasted something sweet and an immediate burst of energy revived and refreshed me.

We walked along the path that led to the old oak grove that Sher and I had visited earlier in the day and the shadowy shape flickered into angelic view when she lit black candles that were laid around the well’s edge. She raised her arms and offered praises to the Imperial Goddess...

“ As I lay the candles down one by one
The flames of love are sent to you
The darkness is our love for you
Their blending is our inspiration
The balance a continuation
A well of deepness our desire. ”

The holy altar was layered with holly and mistletoe, green leaves on the bottom, and their red and white berries interspersed on top. My turn came to pay homage and I knelt before the well, filled with words of adoration.

“ Great Goddess Kermes Twa
Eternal virgin of springtime
You are signified by the red of the holly berries
The red blood of woman
I am blessed to receive Your gift of life

Aequalis, Great God Of Balance
Your sacredness evolves from the oak tree
You are signified by the white of the mistletoe berries
The white semen of man
Marcus, the giver of that life. ”

The angel spoke. “ The hour has arrived. ”

I rose from my knees, mesmerized by the sparkling stars set against the sky’s black velvet background. My life was in balanced harmony; I was the light and Marcus, the darkness. I danced in prayerful praise to the gods, moving ever closer to the flickering flames surrounding the pool of water. My heavenly soul intertwined with the rising mist and my earthly body hovered above the sacred well, then plunged into its icy depths. I sank deeper and faster as extreme exaltation drowned my spirit, but an adrenaline rush slapped me back into consciousness. Kermes Twa screamed, “ Save your life and the lives of your unborn children! ” My lungs were near to bursting as I pushed my feet off the rocky bottom and broke the water’s surface, leaving death behind.

I shook and trembled with cold chills, then heard voices speaking from a great distance. “ This warm water will raise her body temperature. ” A cup was placed against my lips and I drank soothing liquid. “ The elderberry juice will help her sleep. ”

I woke up, not to the comfort and warmth of the bed I shared with Marcus, but with my lips pressed hard against the frozen dirt floor of the jail cell that I’d been unmercifully thrown into. I stood up and paced back and forth while my mind played over the events which had led me to this most wretched of places.

It started that day in early August when my father banished me from his home and sight. I rode to the New York City Harbor docks in my Uncle Joshua’s private carriage. He captained my father’s clipper ship, Goddess of the Sea, and was transporting me to a private girl’s school in Paris, France. Being the only female on board wasn’t to my Uncle’s liking, but there I was, just the same. The first few days I kept myself well occupied in my quarters, reading books that pertained to life at sea. Cabin fever soon took hold and I asked Uncle Joshua if I could go above deck for some fresh air. He was a pleasant and easygoing man, nothing like my father. “ Desiree’, I’ll grant your request on one condition; you must stay in the company of my trusted first mate, Phillipe Grenoble. ”

“ Yes, Uncle, I promise. ” Anything to get out and about.

He walked me to his first mate’s cabin and sharply rapped on the door. The ruggedly handsome face which appeared had long blond hair tied back with a black ribbon. Puzzlement shown in his bright blue eyes.

“ Yes, Captain. ”

“ Phillipe, you’ll be my niece’s escort whenever she’s outside her quarters. If there’s the least hint of trouble with the crew, you may rest assured your head will roll! Is that understood? ”

“ Aye, aye, Captain. ” He saluted smartly to Uncle Joshua’s back. “ So, you’re the ‘secret cargo’ I’ve heard about? ” He smiled and winked.

“ Secret Cargo? ” I rolled my eyes. “ My name is Desiree’ and I’m not a little girl who needs protection. ”

“ A very independent young woman are you? May I take the liberty of calling you by your given name? ” He stopped and waited for my reply.

“ Only if I can call you Phillipe. ” Formalities weren’t my strong suit.

“ And Miss Desiree’, what do you know of men at sea who haven’t seen or been with a woman in years? ” I thought the first mate might be mocking me, but he was serious.

“ I really know very little about the way men think or feel. ” After suffering humiliation twice over, I thought it best to leave the male species alone.

“ Most of them are good men at heart, but sailing for long periods of time means little or no contact with the fairer sex. A woman of exceptional beauty like yourself can do strange things to a man’s blood. It’s my sworn duty to allay trouble of any kind while you’re above deck. ” He paused.

“ Do you know where the term ‘Mate’ comes from? ”

“ No, I don’t Phillipe, but I have the distinct feeling you’re going to tell me. ” We strolled in the fresh salt air and I smiled as the sun caressed my face.

“ It comes from the French word ‘matelot’, meaning sailor. That we all are

onboard Goddess of the Sea and certain of the men have taken on the sea as a wife or mistress. ” Phillipe halted, looking from one end of the clipper to the other. “ I’m an officer of the deck, and I deal with the stowing and discharging of all cargo; secret or not. ” He had a pleasant laugh.

“ Then I take it you’ve known about me from the very beginning of this trip? ”

“ This is not considered a trip, but a voyage. ”

“ And the word voyage originated from? ” I was slightly amused.

“ The Old French veiyage, meaning to sail across. ”

My eyes twinkled. “ And veiyage comes from the Latin word, viaticum, meaning provisions for a journey. And viaticum comes from viaticus, which means of a journey. Viaticus originates from via, which means roadway. ” My attitude was smug.

“ Well done, Miss Desiree’, well done. ” He gave me a deep bow and I curtsied in return.

I was brought back to the present when my stomach growled with hunger pangs. I hadn’t received nourishment since this time the previous day. A miserable, ill-smelling jailer brought me a stale piece of bread and a bowl of watery gruel, which I ate and drank before he snatched it away. My faith and courage remained intact, as I believed in my heart of hearts that Marcus would come to my rescue.

I sat down and thought back to the last week of my voyage. I’d been granted an hour at mid-morning and mid-afternoon to walk the decks freely with Phillipe by my side. We talked of my life on land and his life on sea.

One night in particular lingered in my mind. Uncle Joshua and I gazed at the silvery-blue stars that twinkled in the night sky. “ Desiree’, your father and I are as different as night and day. He invested his money wisely and lives his life in leisure, and I can’t fault him for that. ” He draped his arm around my shoulders. “ Although I have my own family and more than enough money to retire, I’m not content to sit back and watch. ” He puffed on the

meerscham pipe he always carried.

“ That’s why I captain Goddess of the Sea; salt-water has replaced the blood in my veins. ”

“ Tell me more. ” I didn’t know much about him or his family, except that my mother and his wife were twin sisters.

“ Dearest Niece, a clipper captain is a jack of all trades. ” He escorted me to the bridge and showed me personal navigational possessions he’d acquired over the years; wind and current charts, sailing directions, tide tables, and a nautical almanac containing detailed astronomical tables. He told me they were used in conjunction with a compass, a sextant, and a chronometer, whose accuracy permitted longitude to be charted to within a fraction of a degree. He also had his own barometer for predicting weather. “ And now for my prized possession. ” Inside his medicine chest were tonics, medical instruments and a copy of Dr. Abraham T. Lowe’s ‘Sailors Guide to Health.’

“ Uncle Joshua, this is all very entertaining. ” I sighed in boredom.

“ Desiree’, maybe this will draw your interest. ” He brought out a big book containing maps and geographical descriptions of France.

I was elated as he walked me back to my cabin and I kissed his cheek.

“ Thank you, Uncle. ” He closed my door and I turned the lamp wick up so I could start reading. I looked at the map of France and tried to picture what port we’d dock in and what cities we’d travel through in order to reach Paris. The door squeaked and I opened my mouth, ready to scream.

“ What are you doing here? ” My unannounced visitor was Phillippe and I drew the covers up to my chin.

“ I saw your light on and thought something might be wrong. ” He stared at the book lying across my covered legs.

I yawned, feeling more at ease. “ What harbor are we going to berth in? ”

He drew his finger across the English Channel to the southern side of Dunkirk. “ That’s where the crew will unload our cotton and tobacco, and take on wine to trade for rice in China. ” He winked, then thumped his thumb in the middle of the channel. “ Of course, there’ve been many a

sailor's soul lost in benthos. " I gave him a questioning look. " That's Greek for bottom of the sea. " I shivered and thought of nor'easters. " I didn't mean to upset you, Desiree'. Since I've served with your Uncle, we've never had an accident or lost a man at sea. " He glanced at his gold-plated pocket-watch. " The hour grows late and I must sleep while I can, but our conversation will continue in the morning light. " He leaned over and kissed my forehead, then turned down the lamp's wick. " The kiss of Poseidon is given to you for your safety on the sea. Nothing but sweet dreams, my Little Mermaid. "

Sweet dreams, indeed! I'd be better off in the belly of a whale than sitting here in prison. I thought of Jonah in the Bible story; at least he was able to escape after 3 days, although I'm sure he believed otherwise. Faint footfalls became louder, then stopped in front of the bars; how fitting that a man of the cloth should be coming to visit me in my cell.

" Mistress Desiree', are you ready to confess before God and man that Satan dwells in your soul? " He looked directly at me. " And his habitation manifests itself in the form of you, a witch? "

I gave him a look of disdain. " Why would I want to tell lies? I'm not now, nor have I ever been a witch! "

" We have it on good authority that you've consorted with Beelzebub and his followers, acting on his behalf to entice innocent souls into devil worship. " His assessment of me was ludicrous. " Acknowledge and repent of your sins or face the consequences. "

My anger grew by leaps and bounds and I screamed. " I have no need to repent; I've done nothing wrong! " Certainly he knew that.

" Guards, seeing as Mistress Desiree' doesn't feel a confession is in order, maybe the Ducking Stool will change her mind. " Two unshaven men came inside my cell, took me by the arms and carried me outside. I shut my eyes against the brilliant sunlight's glare as they strapped me into a wooden seat that hung from the end of a free moving arm. It was situated above the pond behind the prison and I was ducked repeatedly underneath the cold, winter water's surface. " Do you repent? " Speaking was too difficult a task as my teeth chattered and I trembled in the chilly breeze. " You're pathetic. "

The guards unceremoniously dumped me back on the dirt floor and clanged the prison door shut. I curled up into a tight little ball and fell asleep to tangled dreams as parts of the past and pieces of the present jumbled into a strange reality. “ Marcus, why haven’t you come to save me? Don’t you love me the least little bit? ”

I drifted in and out of consciousness, hearing voices from a distance. “ She’s delirious and doesn’t even know you’ve been with her all night long, Marcus. ”

“ Nancy, can you hear me? It’s Marcus. I love you. ”
I knew the name Nancy, but why Marcus would profess his love for a city in France was beyond my scope of reasoning. Ah, well; dreams can be very hard to explain.

I woke up feeling stiff and sore and laughed bitterly. Each breath I took hurt my lungs and to get my mind off the pain I thought back to my ocean voyage aboard Goddess of the Sea. I’d slept late after the discussion with Phillipe about Dunkirk and benthos, so I missed my morning walk. As I ate lunch, I read the strange sounding names of cities and provinces in France. Someone knocked on my door. “ Who’s there? ”

“ It’s Phillipe. The weather’s warm, the sun is shining, and I’d love nothing more than the pleasure of your company for an afternoon walk, Desiree’. ”

Cool breezes and salt spray misted the air as we walked the decks.
“ You were going to elaborate about Poseidon’s kiss? ”

“ Of course, Desiree’. In Greek mythology, Poseidon is god of the sea, counterpart to the Roman god, Neptune. ” His eyes looked over my shoulder, and he grinned from ear to ear. “ This afternoon brings with it a portent of good luck, as you’re about to receive the real kiss from Poseidon, himself. ”

“ Why on earth would you say that? ” I turned around just in time to get doused by a huge spume of saltwater.

Wet and sputtering, I was about to give Phillipe a rather mean piece of my mind when Uncle Joshua let out a big guffaw. “ Dearest Niece, I see you’ve been initiated! ” He gave me a kiss on both cheeks and sauntered away,

whistling a sea shanty.

“ Phillipe, you knew that wave was coming. I have a feeling you wanted me to get soaked. ” I pouted.

“ I only wished for you to have a small taste of what makes a man fall in love with the sea. To prove my point, I’ll sing you a song of what a sailor feels in his heart, Desiree’ . ” Phillipe’s voice and character were a true fit to what he sang.

“ I’ve set sail on a white-winged clipper
Her billowed sails are spider-spun with silk
The night moon glimmers on the sea green waves
Casting shadow’s glow of foamy milk

Her planks are strong and sturdy
She withstands nor’easters raging rains
She protects us in her gentle bosom
While the Harpy piper plays her pounding strains

My blood of life is ever flowing
Saltwater gushes madly through my veins
My loyal heart is mated to the constant sea
Our golden wedding rings pierced through my ear’s domains

From her salty waves I shan’t be parted
I’ve pledged my vows to live with her eternally
And when death comes, please mark my grave
Throw black roses to the hunger of ocean’s certainty. ”

“ It’s time for me to escort you back to your cabin. ” We reached the door and I wondered what it would be like to love someone or something that deeply. I turned and gave Phillipe a quick kiss, catching him by surprise. “ This Mermaid says that kiss is for showing me such a good time this afternoon. ” I giggled.

“ Does this mean you’re no longer upset with me? ” Phillipe’s face turned bright red.

“ I was never really mad, but that doesn’t mean I’m letting you off the hook. Make a promise that you’ll tell me all you know about Dunkirk and other places in France. ”

“ Desiree’, cross my heart. ” He touched my cheek. “ Go rinse and change into dry clothing as salt rubbing against delicate skin can be an irritating experience. ” He kissed the back of my hand, then sighed.
“ Duty calls, Little Mermaid. ”

If only I’d never been cursed to meet Phillipe, then I’d still be with my husband, Marcus, the love of my life. Could my circumstances get any worse?

“ Meal time. ” The jailer smelled to high heaven of cheap cognac. “ A special feast has been provided for you. ” He unlocked my cell and brought me breakfast or was it dinner? The chunk of bread was hard enough to break my teeth and the soup of the day was pond water with all the trimmings; mud, slime, and dead fish. “ Missy, I thought you could use some fresh meat in your diet. ” He cackled with vicious glee and I glowered. “ Seeing as you don’t appreciate fine French cuisine, then you may do without! ” He emptied the bowl of pond water on my head and by the time I dried my eyes, he was gone with my chunk of bread.

Nothing in the way of good news awaited me as keys clanked and the non-forgiving priest from the day before decided to pay another visit.
“ It seems that you’re still wet from yesterday’s swim. ” He snickered.
“ That’s just a precursor of what you’ll face if you don’t acknowledge your offenses against God. ”

“ My only sins were being born to parents who loved my sister more than they ever loved me. ” Tears of anger spilled down my cheeks.

“ The only things you speak of are lies and falsehoods, Mistress Desiree’. ” I stared at him with all the hatred I felt within my heart.
“ Guards, hold her down! ” My nose was pinched shut, and the jailer forced my mouth open. The most awful taste settled on my tongue, then scalding heat traveled in burning waves from my throat to my stomach with no end in sight. “ Even if this Soapwort doesn’t cleanse your soul, it will cleanse your body. ” I couldn’t comprehend his meaning as my stomach heaved and heaved, bubbling upwards into discontent. “ The true mark of the devil lives

within your untruthful foam! ” I finally collapsed in a heap, too weak and exhausted to care whether I lived or died.

I floated on wavelike currents, dipping in and out of reality, feeling gentle hands laying cool compresses against my burning forehead. Shadowy figures crept towards me, their voices fading though I tried my best to hear them. “ Marcus, is that you? ”

“ No, Mistress Desiree’ . ” The same priest loomed over me in all his self-righteous and sanctimonious glory. “ I’m giving you one last chance to save your sinful soul, and if you’re convincing enough, quite possibly your pitiful life as well. ”

I wanted to feel sorely peeved, but lacked the energy. “ How long have I been in jail? ”

His smile was cruelly taunting. “ Going on three weeks now, Mistress Desiree’ . Have you lost your memory as well as your belief in God? ”

Without Marcus I had no life, and it made no difference whether my soul went to heaven or hell. “ I only want my husband. ”

“ My good woman, if your husband really loved you as much as you say he does, he would have come forward by now and cleared your name. ” The red-robed priest was cold and callous as he gazed deep into my eyes. “ Fall prostrate on your face and swear before God Almighty that you’ve always been and still are a witch and then repent from your evil deeds! ”

“ I’m not in the habit of lying, and it would be an untruth for me to say I’ve ever been or still am a witch. ” My voice was a raspy whisper.

“ Has the cat got your tongue? ” A wicked gleam lit his haughty eyes.

I’d heard fairytales told out of school and read dime novel stories about witches and their black cat familiars being cast as foreboding omens, indicating treachery and deceit amongst the people you trusted most. The men in my life all fit that bill of lading; black in heart and deed. First my father and then Phillippe. Marcus was no exception, being a man of the same

ilk who'd left me to rot in this hell hole of a prison.

“ Well, Mistress Desiree'? You're wasting precious time by not answering me! ” His rage permeated the very air I breathed.

“ I swear I'll get my revenge on you, even if I have to go to hell and make a bargain with the devil himself. ” My words were quietly hissed.

He back handed me, drawing blood from my nose and mouth. His eyes grew large as saucers and he hit me again, for emphasis. “ Mistress Desiree', you've sealed your fate. ” His hand was covered in red as he lifted it to his mouth and licked off every last drop. He left me with my nose and mouth bleeding, but returned a short while later with another man dressed in robes of the Royal Court.

“ Isn't she a perfect specimen? ”

“ Are you sure no one knows of her whereabouts, or cares enough to ask questions that might cause trouble for us? ” They entered my cell and the black-robed man stared intently, then kissed my lips. “ Such a delightful taste; you have one week to prepare her. ”

That thought did nothing to ease my spirit as they left and a stranger's face came into view. “ My name is Henri, Mistress Desiree'. My wife is an excellent cook and I've brought vegetable soup and soft pudding from our very own table. ” He set the food before me and watched while I ate mouthful after mouthful and drank sweet fresh milk that soothed my stomach. He patted my hand and smiled.

“ Close your eyes and try to rest. ”

Sleep evaded me as my mind returned to Phillipe and Goddess of the Sea. I was wide awake, studying the maps in the book that Uncle Joshua had given me to read, when I heard Phillipe's voice. I opened my cabin door, and he slipped inside. “ I have some important news to tell you, Desiree'. Your Uncle has invited me to join both of you on your trip to Paris. ” He was very excited.

“ Phillipe, that's wonderful. ”

He sat beside me. “ Now I'll tell you about the regions we'll travel through on our way to Paris. After we berth in Dunkirk, we'll spend the night

onboard ship, then rise early and make our way overland by stagecoach to Amiens, and be in Paris the next day. ”

“ Tell me more. ”

“ In the 7th century, Saint Eloi built a church in the middle of the sand dunes. Dunkirk is Flemish for ‘Church on the Dunes’ and the town was ruled under Burgundian, Austrian, and Spanish flags. The English captured it in 1658 and it was sold to France in 1662 by Charles II of England. ” His eyes twinkled as he gave me the history lesson. “ This region contains many contrasting landscapes; wooded forests, meadows and marshlands, rolling hills, and a varied coastline that stretches for miles and miles. ”

“ How do you know so much, Phillipe? ”

“ I always bought books and maps when we were given shore leave, and I’ve used much of my free time to read and study. ” He smiled.

“ Now on to Amiens: France was born here when Clovis made Soissons the first capital of the Franks, in 486. Hugues Capet was elected king of France at Senlis, and was crowned at Noyon in 987. This region has many lakes, rivers, cliffs and beach areas. Also numerous sand dunes, coastal marshes and forests. ”

“ And Paris? ” I wanted to know about the city I’d be calling home.

“ Napoleon, Charlemagne, Joan of Arc, Louis the XIV and all the kings of France traveled through the area surrounding Paris, leaving their marks with magnificent cathedrals and medieval abbeys, as well as gardens and parks within Paris proper. ” He glanced at his pocket watch. “ The hour grows late and I must take my leave of you. ” He bowed at my doorway.

“ Good night my Little Mermaid; may Poseidon keep you safe within his salty bosom. ” Phillipe threw me a kiss and was gone in an instant.

I was no more safe than I’d been for any frame of time in my life; always considered the scapegoat, blamed for any misfortune which arose within my family, including the fact my father held me responsible for my mother’s death.

“ Mistress Desiree’, I see you’re still awake. ” Henri brought a soft mattress into my cell.

Tears came to my eyes and I hugged his neck. “ You’re the first person to show me anything resembling decency in quite some time. ” In gratefulness I lay down and fell fast asleep.

Chapter 10

Keys clanked and I awoke to wonderful scents of eggs, porridge and milk. “ Satisfy the hunger inside of you, Mistress Desiree’ . ” I ate every morsel and drank every drop as Henri watched.

Unsettling thoughts came to roost. “ Henri, what’s going to happen to me at the end of this week; what am I being prepared for? ”

He frowned, then shrugged his shoulders. “ All I know is that I’m paid to feed you and help you recover your strength. ”

I had plenty of time to consider my fate, but my mind wouldn’t think in coherent terms. I yawned, then stretched out on my soft mattress and slept some more. The next four days I ate and slept, slowly regaining my energy and resolve, but on the fifth day a beautiful dark-haired lady accompanied Henri to my cell. He introduced her to me as his wife, Cecelia, and left me in her capable hands. Her demeanor was no nonsense and matter of fact, yet her tone conveyed deference to me. “ Mistress Desiree’ , your breakfast is served. ” There were eggs, ham, fresh milk, and sweet apples. “ Today your fate has been decided. ” She smiled. “ At the King’s behest, I’m to turn you into a Lady-In-Waiting for his Royal Court. You’ll be given a bath, have your hair washed and styled and your fingernails buffed and polished. The King himself has ordered his personal clothier to fit you. Henri and I will be allowed to accompany you to his castle, and I’ll make sure you’re settled in your new living quarters. ” Once the regular jailer made his rounds, Cecelia was more animated. “ Mistress Desiree’ , the gods have truly rained blessings on you today. ”

She waited to see if I’d agree, but I knew deep within my heart about deceitful intentions passing as truth. The priest and the man who’d worn the court robes meant no good to come of my situation. “ It’s doubtful the gods

even know of my existence. ”

“ You’re wrong about that, Mistress Desiree’ . ” She extended her hand and helped me stand up. “ Are you strong enough to walk the short distance from here to the Royal Court? ”

“ Cecelia, I’d walk to Hell and back in order to remove myself from this vile and wicked place. ”

My dress hung in rags and tatters, and I smelled like a drowned sewer rat, yet she put her own cape over my shoulders and treated me with love and respect, never uttering a mean or degrading word. “ Henri, tell the jailer we’re ready to leave. ” She leaned over and whispered, “ Henri will walk us to the King’s castle, because the streets are never safe for women without a male companion. ”

Henri walked on one side of me and Cecelia the other. The jailer set a quick pace past small cells occupied by wild-men, who laughed, screamed and hissed at us. When the main door was unlocked, buildings gleamed dazzling white in the blinding sunlight and I turned my head, seeing my footprints trail blood on the cobblestones. They soon disappeared as ominous shapes hovered over them. We stopped in front of a concealed door and Henri pulled twice on the hanging rope; a bell gonged, announcing our arrival and a loud guttural voice asked, “ Who goes there? ”

“ Henri and Cecelia; we’ve brought Mistress Desiree’ as ordered. ” We slipped inside and followed the guard down a dimly lit hallway to an enclosed bathing area.

“ I’ll see you tomorrow at this time, Henri. ” Cecelia hugged him, gave him a kiss, then he left with the guard. “ Let me help you out of these clothes so you may bathe. ” She removed her cape from my shoulders and undid the few remaining buttons on the back of my tattered dress, then gently touched my skin where the bruises and scratches were fading. “ I know that a woman of your station and bearing must have found it difficult to adjust to prison life, but we’ll make you beautiful again, Mistress Desiree’ . ”

“ Cecelia, without my husband to see me, why should I care? ” Any hopes that Marcus would ever come to my rescue had been for naught.

“ Mistress Desiree’, even though you cannot see your husband right now, you must believe that the purpose of your sadness will be turned into happiness one day. ” She hugged me tightly.

“ Cecelia, Marcus was that one special man who loved and understood me better than anyone else. With him by my side, I was happy living in this world, but things changed when he left me to fend for myself. ” Tears fell unbidden from my eyes. “ Now I feel as if I never existed and that hurts more than I can say. ”

“ Without my Henri and his love, I’d feel as you do. ” While we talked, female servants brought hot water for me to bathe in. “ Mistress Desiree’, I’ve asked for some special items to help soften and heal your skin. A Lady-In-Waiting must look and feel her best; on the inside as well as the outside of her body. ”

“ Thank you, Cecelia. Whatever happens or becomes of me, I’m glad that you and Henri have come into my life. ” She helped me settle into the fragrant liquid. “ This is much better than the freezing pond water. ” I laughed just a bit.

“ Yes, Mistress Desiree’, I’ve heard of your adventure. Men and governments can be very cruel. ” She barely smiled, then nodded at the servant who handed her a small container. “ I’m adding sweet almond and aloe to the water. ” Her voice calmed my nerves and she began washing my back in slow circular motions. “ Relax and I’ll tell you the story of how the almond came to be. In Greek mythology, a beautiful nymph named Phyllis was deserted by her lover, Demophoon, but instead of letting her die by her own hands, the gods took pity upon her and transformed her into a flowering almond tree, giving those who beheld her, the joy of her beauty and the fragrance of her love. The moral of the story is that even the worst of life’s hopeless tragedies can be turned into blooming miracles; what we perceive as death, altered into life’s eternal circle. ”

I sighed in resignation and told her my story. “ Cecelia, I was an outcast for many years, receiving scant love from either my father or sister. The best thing that happened in my life was when my Father forced me to leave home. ” Memories, both good and bad flooded my mind. “ I set sail on his clipper ship, Goddess of the Sea, with my Uncle Joshua. He, my Aunt Madeliane and my Cousin Annelle loved me unconditionally, giving me the

care and attention I'd missed while growing up. " I frowned.

" Through my Uncle Joshua, I met two men who impacted my life; first of all Phillipe, the man who had me thrown into jail to repay his debts, and later on, my husband, Marcus. "

" But Mistress Desiree', the circles in our lives are never ending; they all intertwine, going off on differing tangents, but everything comes back to the universal Circle of Love. " She showed me her plain gold wedding band.

" Cecelia, I remember the ring Marcus graced my finger with on the day we married; October 17th, 1875, my 18th birthday. "

" How romantic to have a Birthday Wedding. Tell me about your ring, Mistress Desiree'. "

She rubbed my roughened hand, my finger devoid of the symbolic Love which Marcus had said belonged to his Mother. " Cecelia, imagine an oval shaped lavender moonstone surrounded by an inner circle of seven emeralds and an outer circle of seven opals. Marcus said it would remind him of the love he had for both his Mother and me. " I shook my head. " I have no idea where that ring is now. "

" Each type of stone has its own meaning, Mistress Desiree'. The ring you describe tells of how much Marcus thought of the two women he loved most in his life. " A faraway gaze came into her eyes. " The moonstone itself is a gem of wishes and intuition, the great balancer of emotions. It brings about new beginnings, rebirth, motherly love, support and encouragement. "

" And the other stones? " I asked.

" The emerald brings security in love, allowing access to healing, while activating our highest heart's desire. It's a powerful stone of prophecy and abundance, inspiring calm clear assurance. " She transferred her attention to me. " Everything I told you about the moonstone and emeralds came to pass in your life when you married Marcus. Am I right? "

" Yes, Cecelia. Our love was a rare gift from heaven and I considered myself to be the most blessed of women on the day we said our vows. "

" Opals surround the user with an aura of mystery, intensity, and charisma. "

Her eyes took on a reddish hue. “ Tell me the circumstances leading up to your being thrown in prison as this part of your life will influence your future and the future of people you haven’t even met. ”

“ The story of my fall into disgrace? It’s quite entertaining, no doubt about that. ” Cecelia had roused my curiosity, and I explained my life right up to the present moment. During this time I’d finished bathing and my hair had been washed with a mixture of ground wild oats and olive oil, lightly scented with the remainder of the sweet almond oil. She helped me out of the water and dried me off with a royal towel. When that task was completed, a woman dressed in court finery came to take my measurements for the clothing I was to wear as a Lady-In-Waiting. When she finished, she wrote her numbers down, then handed me a dressing gown and robe made of purest silk, imported from China. The gown was snow white around the bottom and then depicted the many varied colors of the sunrise, layer upon layer, until it was blood red around the top. The robe I wore matched it perfectly.

As Cecelia led the way to my quarters, three servant girls followed us at a discreet distance. Glowing candles in raised sconces lit a long dark hallway that twisted and turned, and I felt like a rat in a maze as shadows danced in grotesque patterns, sending shivers down my spine. Cecelia finally stopped in front of an open door that revealed a room of stately proportions, much like I was used to. Set against the back wall was a massive bed with thick wooden legs and long posts. Carved into the posts were various women in Egyptian style attire, while the legs were carved into Sphinxes with lion paws.

Displayed on top of a marble table were differing sizes of blue and red glazed bottles and black bowls filled to the brim with ointments, perfumes, nail polishes, and facial cosmetics. To the side of this table was a small matching settee facing a gilded ornate mirror. Cecelia motioned me to sit down and the three servant girls began turning me into a Lady-In-Waiting.

One of the servant girls spoke to Cecelia in a quiet whisper. “ Mistress Desiree’, per the King’s orders, all Ladies-In-Waiting must have their hair colored with henna, which is his personal preference. ” Cecelia and the servant girl had another short conference and she picked up one of the bowls. “ This powder is mixed with olive oil to add a radiant luster to your lovely tresses. Tomorrow afternoon, your hair will be styled according to the

King's wishes. " As I gazed into the mirror, one servant girl worked the reddish tint into my ebony locks with a golden comb. The second girl buffed and polished my fingernails, while the third servant girl did the same with my toenails. The same mixture that had been used to color my hair was gently rubbed on my fingernails and toenails, turning them blood red.

A sharp rap came at the door. Two menservants carrying food and beverages on huge silver trays were allowed to come inside. Delicious smells drifted to my nostrils, and I realized how hungry I was. " What do you suggest, Cecelia? " I was overwhelmed with so many choices.

She looked at the offerings. " The goose liver pâté' for an appetizer, then the bouillabaisse with fresh shrimp, oysters, and mussels for your main meal. The crusty bread and a green salad will go well with that and for dessert, a strawberry tart. And plenty of fresh milk for you to drink. " She put the items on a plate and placed it in front of me. " Eat it all, Mistress Desiree'. Your health and strength are most important to you now. "

I needed no encouragement as I was famished. " Please join me, Cecelia. It's delicious. "

" Mistress Desiree', that would go against all conventionality. I'd be thrown in prison if I were to associate with you, except for acting in the capacity of being your servant. " She bowed her head.

" I'm sorry, Cecelia. " I sighed. " I hope that no matter what, we can remain friends. "

She leaned over. " Of course we'll always be friends, but talk of this nature, is very dangerous for both of us. " Cecelia squeezed my hand.

I heeded her warning. " Cecelia, " I yawned, " I'm tired and need to rest. " She helped me into the soft down bed and I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

I woke up out of a sound sleep, confused and startled. I had no idea as to my whereabouts, but glancing around brought back memories of the past week. I was to become a Lady-In-Waiting at the King's castle, but knew a dreadful fate awaited me. The door opened and Cecelia came in, closely followed by a serving girl bearing a tray heaped with breakfast fare. I breathed deeply

and my stomach rumbled as smells of apricots, apples, and cherries wafted to my nostrils. Alongside the fresh fruit tarts were sharp cheeses to eat and cold milk to drink. I was even hungrier than the night before and ate as though it might be my last meal. “ The time has come to rise and shine, Mistress Desiree’. The morning hour grows late and we must ready you for your presentation before the King tonight. ” Servants carried assorted bowls filled with ointments and cosmetics into my room. On their heels were the King’s personal hairdresser, his clothier, and their entourage.

I blushed in embarrassment when Cecelia asked me to disrobe as no man on the face of the earth had seen my nakedness except Marcus. Hands wielding soft cloths rubbed and massaged almond oil into every inch of my body, again and again, until my skin was soft and supple. Cecelia patted the settee in front of the gilt-framed mirror. I sat down and the King’s personal make-up artist applied exotic cosmetics to my face, explaining their magical attributes as he worked. “ For his personal pleasure this evening, the King has ordered you to look like Hella Dracon, the infamous Egyptian Goddess. Everything you see is authentic. ” He dipped his fingertips into a clay pot, then dabbed and blended the silkened creme on my cheeks in circular motions until they turned blood red. “ This rouge is ochre, made of iron oxide. ” He wiped off his fingertips and chose two lead-cut crystal dishes, one filled to the brim with blue powder and one small bowl swirling with golden oil. A heavy silver spoon engraved with the King's insignia was used to scoop the powder into the oil, creating a thick paste which he smoothed on my lips.

“ This mixture is made from crushed dried grapes, added to a secret recipe that only a few people know of. ” My lips burned like hot incense, then froze into a solid smile, while my heart circulated blood ever faster to my veins and my nerves tingled in horrific anticipation of what was to come. He used a small horsehair brush to outline my eyes in dark grey. “ This color is a derivative of a lead ore called Galena. It’s supposed to protect the wearer from the ‘Evil Eye.’ ”

His helper whispered, “ But not in her particular case. ” He slapped his hand over his open mouth, stifling his amusement at my expense.

My eyelids were brushed with a dark green ointment. “ This copper ore is Malachite, symbolizing fertility. ” His helper burst into gales of outright laughter and was quickly banished from my room.

After my hair was woven into an intricate design resembling snakes writhing on my head, two servant girls helped me rise and I stepped into a close fitted white linen sheath which flowed from my breasts to my feet. The King's personal dresser said, " This is a kalasari. " On top of this he placed a fringed and pleated crimson robe that he wrapped tightly around my waist and shoulders, then secured it underneath my bosom with a round black medallion whose center was adorned with a glowing golden star.

A signal was given. " The time has come for your presentation before the King, Mistress Desiree' . " Cecelia took my hand and we walked behind the personal dresser to a grand ballroom. Men and women milled about, but upon our entrance a path opened up, just like the Red Sea parting for the Israelites in their escape route from the Egyptians in the Bible story. I was led to a raised dais and ordered to stand alone with my back pressed against a black cross. Cecelia had tears in her eyes as she left my side. Two bands of pure gold, each designed as a single snake, intertwined themselves on my upper arms. My hands were lifted, then stretched out horizontally and held in place by two men servants, dressed as Egyptian slaves. My wrists and ankles were tied with strong golden cords so I had no means of escape. The lighting in the room dimmed as thirteen girls around my age proceeded down the aisle from the back of the room. They were dressed as vestal virgins and carried small oil lamps, which they placed in front of me. Off to the side came sounds of lutes, flutes and harps, playing a strange haunting melody. I shivered inside my soul as these girls danced, taking off layer after layer of thin translucent veils. Each of them was tattooed on their arms, legs, shoulders, backs, breasts and bellies with snakes of gold, blue, red, orange, and yellow. Slow sensuous motions turned into a frenzied dance of evil proportions which ended abruptly. One by one they came and bowed low to me, then kissed my right cheek.

They removed themselves from my presence and the King prostrated his royal body at my feet, speaking in tones of reverence and awe. " Hella Dracon, Theophanic Goddess of Blood, I can see how pleased you are at this feast presented in your honor. " He crawled away as my nightmare began.

Parading from every corner to the center of the room were monks carrying ebony staffs of intertwined snakes. Clothed with blood-stained robes of white that obscured most of their facial features, they surrounded the podium where I stood and I knew my fate was sealed for eternity. These evil men were part and parcel of the same unholy order of monks who lived at

Montague Chapel, and the Cathedral in Nancy where Annelle and I had gone as unwelcome guests. Their leader's fetid breath smelled of hell-bent sulphur. "I told you I always remember a face!" He threw back his cowl, and his countenance revealed a hideous black snake with blood-encrusted fangs and eyes of red. I said a quick prayer asking forgiveness of my numerous sins before meeting my Maker.

He faced the crowd and they fell to their knees in worship, chanting...
"Blessed is the cruel and relentless name of Blaec Toth Snaca who rules the forces of chaos and confusion, personifying darkness and wickedness."

His palm rested on the medallion which clasped my robe together. He removed it, then pressed it to my lips as the robe billowed around my feet. His roughened hands pushed the kalisari to my waist, freeing my breasts for everyone to see. "Imprint your souls with the beauty of her skin." He paused. "Inhale the blessed scent of precious almond offerings." I wanted to faint dead away, blot out what was to occur from my mind, but fate didn't give me an opportunity to shape my final destiny. "She's truly the sacred vessel." A doomsday vision of being ravaged enveloped me, but it wasn't a rape in any sense of the word that I understood. "This visage of Hella Dracon will soon flow with fresh sweet blood, the Life Force which nourishes and sustains us."

Blaec Toth Snaca placed his unholy hands on my breasts as his evil mouth sought my nipples. He bit down with a force so hard I bled, then screamed in terror as tears streamed hotly down my cheeks. "Tears and blood; the wisdom of the Goddess herself." He held up his hand for silence. "Our benefactress has arrived and will be honored with life everlasting for the gift she's provided." I cursed the person who'd given me to these people and hoped she'd spend her life rotting away in hell, but as Dame Fortune would have it, I'd be the first to arrive at that destination. "Apostles, come and feast!" One by one the thirteen monks found a new spot on my body in which to partake of my blood. Over and over again their pointed fangs bit into my soft tender flesh as I writhed in agony, growing woozy and faint, but just before I passed out, a flash of bright blond hair clouded my vision.

The room was dark, but the bed I lay in was comfortable and warm. Someone shook my shoulders.

"Mistress Desiree', what's wrong with you? Did you have

another nightmare? ” My eyes were accustomed to the scant light and Cecelia leaned over me, worry written on her face.

“ I must have died and gone to heaven, because your kindness and love has guaranteed you a prominent position there. ” I cautiously searched my surroundings. I wasn't in the jail cell, or my quarters at the King's Castle.

“ Don't be afraid, Mistress. Your safety is assured at my Mother's house. When I told her of your plight, she spoke to the Great Goddess Kermes Twa, and it was decided that you'd recuperate here, until her vengeance is complete. ” Memories of the awful atrocities that had been perpetrated upon my body returned to me in full force and hot tears scalded my face, releasing some of the deep-seated pain I felt. Immense comfort and peace enveloped me as Cecelia held me close to her heart. A soft tapping came at the door. “ Mother, please come in. Desiree' has remembered more of her evening with the King and his evil cohorts. ”

“ Desiree', you've been sleeping on and off for the last five days and all of your needs have been met. ” Valera helped me to a sitting position and I gulped down an endless supply of sweet thick liquid nourishment which gave me strength, resolve, and the purpose of my awakening.

“ I want to see what my body looks like. ” The mirror reflected not a mark, a bite, or even a flesh wound. My hair was the deep auburn color of maple leaves in autumn, my skin supple, with an alabaster glow. “ Valera, how could this be? If memory serves me correctly, I should appear to be a zombie, yet I see nothing, not even a faded bruise to tell of the tragedies I've suffered. ”

“ I've added the protecting essence of barberry to the life force which you've been given to drink as there's no telling what disease or infections those animals could have passed on to you. ” I shuddered at the thought.

“ Centaury has a reputation for repelling evil spirits and will aide in the healing of your veins and arteries. ” She turned me around this way and that, gazing at me with a critical eye. “ You're a true beauty, Desiree', both inside and out and Kermes Twa is well pleased with your recovery and progress. After your coming out party tonight, you must freely give your heart and soul to her so she can direct your life as she sees fit. ”

I was filled with raw emotions, an angry hatred that went beyond my

comprehension. Vague recollections left me wondering if I'd been sexually assaulted, but I couldn't even manage to voice those concerns.

Cecelia noticed my distress. " Mistress Desiree', I know the question that haunts your mind and all that was taken from your body was your blood. If any man had touched you otherwise, he would have been killed on the spot. " Tears came to her eyes. " I'm so sorry I couldn't prevent what happened to you. " I kissed and hugged her, knowing that she loved me unconditionally. " Those wicked men wanted more than anything to see you dead, so they threw you back into the dungeon, never believing you'd recover. For three months you lingered on the brink of death, but Henri and I took care of you each and every day until all your debts were repaid to the church and government's satisfaction. "

" What more did they expect from me? "

" Bribes for your being exonerated as a witch, of course. " Valera smiled.

" But I've never been a witch! "

" You and I know that, Desiree'. It was just a means to get you out of the way. " I was baffled to say the least, and Valera answered my unspoken question. " Desiree', don't be petulant or impatient. All will be revealed in the good time of Kermes Twa, when she determines that your mind is ready to accept the totality of your situation. " She moved over to the closet and brought back a stunning ball gown, a jeweled mask shaped like a blooming rose, and an elaborate powdered wig. The velvet burgundy bodice on the two piece gown was gently scooped at the neckline and evolved into a deep v at the waistline. The long sleeves were cream colored lace rosettes and the flowing skirt was white silk, overlaid with side panels of mellow red, embroidered with lavish rose-shaped pearls. The blood-red mask was studded with sparkling diamonds, and there were real red and white roses pinned to my white powdered wig. My necklace was a strand of rose-shaped white pearls and I wore red rose-shaped rubies in my ears.

The moment Valera applied my lipstick, emotions and feelings surfaced with a vengeance. It was a one of a kind special gift from Marcus that I'd recognize anywhere. " Yes, Desiree', let all the hurt and anger accompany the dark deeds that you'll accomplish tonight. " Kermes Twa filled me with her heart and soul. " Your tormentors will find that the 'Rose Queen of Paris' has many thorns hidden beneath her soft smooth flesh. They'll pay in

high stakes of blood, death, and eternal damnation for their intentional black-hearted acts. After tonight is over you'll freely give yourself to me of your own accord, Desiree'." My focus came to a sharp-edged point with revenge being the ulterior motive. Seeking to do unto others as they'd done unto me was the only rule to be followed. "Desiree', once you were deemed dead by your loving husband and your death certificate was signed, sealed, and delivered to the highest court, Marcus left everything in your Paris hotel room to Valera's religious order. I told her to keep your lipstick and distribute the rest of your personal possessions to the poor and needy." The Great Goddess paused to let this information sink in.

"What of everything else that I had at Castle Desiree'?"

"Put those thoughts out of your mind. Anything that was there has been moved to America, along with Marcus and his stepsister, Sheridan. After tonight, a return to Castle Desiree' would bring disaster upon your head that not even I could fix."

I didn't recognize the image reflected in the mirror. "Are you ready for your grand entrance, Desiree'?" I nodded yes. "Then follow me." The view from the Grand Ballroom landing was magnificent, its staircase flaring and flowing gracefully like my ball-gown. Everyone's attention was drawn in my direction.

With Valera, Cecelia, and Kermes Twa to guide and direct me, I vowed that this would be the beginning of many night's worth of pleasure and gratitude to those who knew and loved me with no reservations. I smiled at the crowd. "Please continue dancing and making merry in my house; the night is young and every minute should be savored like a fine Burgundy Wine." There was general applause and I slipped to the refreshment table.

Gustav served up bubbly Champagne and the best of various wines from regions all over France. He kissed the back of my hand. "Mistress Rose, I see the first of many suitors, come to fill your dance card for this evening. And when you find one to your liking your blood will scream out your name, seeking retribution for being victimized." He pointed to a closed door, directly behind him.

"Thank you, Gustav. Not just for right now, but for everything you've done for me." I turned around and came mask to mask with a tall gentleman

dressed all in black. The sound of my blood running through his veins drowned out the orchestra music.

“ Would you care to dance, Queen Rose? ” He bowed low and I gave him my full flirtatious attention as we waltzed around the floor to violins, clarinets, flutes and piano.

The music stopped and I whispered in his ear, “ Thank you for this dance. ” I fanned my face and glided towards the punch bowl. “ I’m quite thirsty and have acquired a special claret that begs to be tasted in a private setting. Please join me? ” Gustav opened the door and I giggled like a teenage schoolgirl. “ Give me just a short minute to light some candles. ” While I busied myself, Gustav slipped inside with his wooden stake and steel hammer, then pounded home his point. I stood behind a silkscreen for protection and heard a small grunt as blood splattered all over the room; only when all thirteen monks were dead could I partake of what was rightfully and so righteously mine.

My work efforts took on a religious frenzy as one by one I lured the monks to my lair. I knew the ringleader would be hard to fool, but his weakness would do him in. I boldly offered him a goblet of crimson wine, tinged with the barest hint of my life force for his drinking pleasure. Valera had added cowslip flowers and jimson weed to deaden his nerves, inducing a need to sleep. His eyes widened in surprise as he downed it in one big gulp. “ There’s more where that came from, Kind Sir. ” Once inside the room, Gustav quickly bolted the door and with unrelenting force drove the stake straight into his evil heart. A bursting bombshell of blood spewed forth, covering me in a current of screaming voices and I wished I could have eased the pain, humiliation and degradation each victim had faced.

“ Desiree’, use their words of agony to chart your course. ” A golden chalice filled with blood was handed to me and as his life force joined mine, a picture of my beloved blond sister-in-law, Sheridan, came to roost. She was the one to blame for my predicament and I vowed she’d pay with her life, even if it took forever. “ Patience, Desiree’, patience. The time of reckoning will come for all who have wronged you. ” Kermes Twa was right.

I was covered in blood from head to toe and couldn’t afford to have the guests think ill of me, so Valera made my good-byes. The ball was deemed a resounding success and the guests went to their homes, telling tales of Queen

Rose and the magnificent party she'd thrown for society's upper crust. In order for my own survival in the coming months all the bodies of the damned would have to be removed from Valera's home and buried underneath Castle Desiree', from whence they came.

"Desiree'." I jumped when Valera entered the room. "Please remove your clothing, wig and shoes for the cleansing ritual." I left everything I wore on my side of the threshold, so no tell-tale blood would be tracked on the floors to attract unwanted attention. The only blood which remained was on the exposed skin of my hands, arms, neck, and face. We walked to a backroom bathing area where two tubs were positioned side by side. She motioned me to the empty one and poured steaming water over my head and body from the second one to wash the evil stench from my pores. More hot water was supplied and I slipped into an enveloping cloud of rose-scented liquid. "Allow your mind to relax as you breathe deeply, in and out."

As I did, words came with no effort..

"The perfect precision of truth is a Crimson World
Red the blooming rose of my attack
Swift as the eagle's flight my vow of vengeance
The onslaught of evil which pervades is cut off at its roots
While the peace of work well-done rises to heaven
I am the Great Goddess Kermes Twa
Expecting love and obedience to my will
Prepared to receive what you freely offer as my due"

I rose, then prostrated myself in humble obedience. "The ownership of my heart and soul now belong entirely to you, Great Goddess Kermes Twa. Forever and ever, amen." I learned of Kermes Twa and her ways and reasonings. Happy to be her servant, I steadily healed in mind and body, seeking to avenge Sheridan's actions against me. The year went by in a flurry of gaiety as I received and accepted numerous invitations to parties, dances, and socials in order to raise monies for the poor and underprivileged in Paris. In return, known evil doers who came to pay their respects to me in private received their just rewards in the guise of the Grim Reaper.

As my first anniversary of being married to Marcus approached, I knew I'd be sailing to America before winter's foul weather forced us to remain in France until the next April or May. I thought to book passage onboard one of

my father's clipper ships, but Kermes Twa wouldn't give me her authorization. Valera, Gustav and I left Paris, bound for Dunkirk on September 1st, 1876, and sailed from the same docks where my Uncle Joshua, Phillipe and I had entered France, early the next morning. The ship anchored in the port of New York City on October 1st and I soon found out it was a small world, after all.

Early one December evening, not far from the house I shared with Valera and Gustav, I was peering at Christmas decorations in the shop windows when someone tapped my shoulder. I turned around and was shocked to see Phillipe's face. "Bethanie, I knew you'd come." He grinned like a little boy receiving an early Christmas present. "This afternoon surpassed my wildest expectations!" He kissed me passionately, leaving me breathless, while black anger burned inside my heart. I'd learned that blond, brown-eyed Sheridan was his long lost sister just before I was thrown into jail to alleviate his debts to the state and church.

But why in heaven's name had he wanted to meet Bethanie at this particular spot? Did my sister-in-law introduce them to each other? These questions danced merrily in my mind as he grabbed my hand and held on for dear life.

Kermes Twa spoke. "Act calmly and find out about Bethanie's relationship to Phillipe."

"No one will take notice of us, or has Marcus arrived?" He frowned. I wanted to shout that Marcus was probably with Bethanie, but thought better of that notion as tears streamed down my face.

"I didn't mean to upset you, Bethanie." He removed a handkerchief I'd seen before with a picture of Poseidon hovering above two ships; one in fair weather, the other in foul. He gently wiped my cheeks.

"I know how hard this is on you." He gathered my hand in his and we walked up the boulevard and stopped in front of a small restaurant. Phillipe opened the door and the smell of fine food and wine drifted towards us. We were given a seat near the roaring fireplace and Phillipe ordered Bethanie's favorite dish; steak tartar, along with peppered green beans and crisp potatoes. I'd never cared for meat that rare, but the blood red juices roused my appetite. "You must have shopped for hours to be this hungry." He laughed easily. "Did you wait very long for me?"

Even though it had been almost a year since I'd seen his face or heard his voice, I answered, "Just a few minutes."

“ I’ve finalized plans to move to San Francisco and will soon have a title and enough money to suit your father. Bethanie, we can be married within two year’s time. ” Phillipe bubbled over in his earnest enthusiasm.

He was a naive soul in many ways. “ Phillipe, my father is unbending in his attitude. He considers you far beneath my station and would never consent to us being married, no matter how much money you accrue, or what title you might have down the road. ” I told him the truth of the matter from my own perspective, but if he was willing to marry Bethanie, so much the better for everyone concerned, especially Marcus and me. Having Bethanie defy our father would be sweet revenge and I gave him my best Bethanie smile. “ I know you’ll find a way for us to be together, Phillipe. ”

“ Desiree’, think of who has the most to gain from this intrigue. ” Kermes Twa was a whisper on the wind.

The answer came from Phillipe’s own lips. “ Have you spoken to Sheridan recently? ” He eyed me with concern. “ She told me she’d help us in any way possible, even if Marcus is hurt in the process. She said more pain would come if you were to marry him, and not love him with all your heart and soul. ” Speaking to Sheridan would be the last thing I’d do, but the thought of getting my hands around her scrawny little neck, and sinking my teeth into her veins brought smiles of joy and delight. “ Have you taken to daydreaming? ”

I opened my eyes, having forgotten whose presence I was in. “ No, Phillipe, but those are words I believe she’d tell both of us. ” It finally dawned on me that Sheridan was in love with Marcus. She believed I was out of the way for good, and if Bethanie were to marry Phillipe, then she’d have a clear shot at snagging my husband, but what she didn’t realize was that she’d always be his sister, nothing else.

With supper almost finished, Phillipe glanced at his watch. “ I’m leaving early in the morning for California, but I’ll return as soon as possible to claim you and your love. ” He kissed me swiftly, paid the bill, then left me to contemplate everything he said.

On my way towards home, I asked myself more questions. Could it be possible that Bethanie was no longer a virgin? I laughed,

knowing full well that Marcus would leave her in the dust if he ever found out she'd been unfaithful in any way. Even in all the time I'd been a Vampire, I'd never once considered giving my body or heart to another man and never would.

Valera was past upset when I arrived at the front door. "Desiree', you were supposed to be home hours ago!" She grabbed my arm and hurried me inside. "You've kept Mother Superior and the Sisters of Mercy waiting in the parlor for quite some time. They're here to discuss the upcoming Christmas party for their orphanage which you said you'd sponsor."

"And I still am, Valera. Being with the children makes me feel normal." I kissed her cheek. "I'm sorry to be so late, but I ran into an old friend." Valera looked less than pleased with my announcement as I removed my coat, hat, and gloves for her to put away.

Two nuns with soured expressions accompanied Mother Superior. They both stood, one on each side of her, while she sat front and center on the camelhair couch in the parlor. "Dearest Ladies, I hope Valera has kept you comfortable while I was garnering ideas for the children's upcoming Christmas celebration." That was partly truth as I'd bought decorations and toys, and a humongous Christmas tree to be delivered early next morning. "The true way to make my heart content is to hold the children's party in my humble home."

Mother Superior and Valera were good friends, even though their religious beliefs were at opposite ends of the spectrum.

"That's very generous of you Miss Terrance. I'm sure the children will be delighted." The Great Goddess had told me the timing wasn't right for anyone to know I was alive yet, so I'd gone back to using my maiden name, and shortened my middle name of Roselynn to just plain Rose.

After Valera escorted Mother Superior and the nuns to the door, she was peeved. "Please explain your whereabouts." I told her what had transpired with Phillipe. "The Great Goddess in her infinite wisdom led him to you, Desiree'. She'll continue to guide and direct your life till your destiny is met and fulfilled." She sighed as she perceived my thoughts and questions about Sheridan, Marcus, Bethanie and Phillipe.

"I know that you grow impatient to see Marcus, but you have plenty of time to bide now. The fruition of a hasty revenge against them will come back to

haunt you. ”

“ Valera, even if I were to see Marcus, I doubt he’d accept the truth of my situation. ” A boulder of sadness and despair fell on my heart. “ I’m going to my room and don’t wish to be disturbed. ” Sitting at my desk, I dipped my favorite gold pen in the inkwell and wrote a list of all the things I wished I could say to Marcus. Even to my eyes, they seemed a fanciful lot of lies and I crumpled sheet after sheet of paper, realizing that words without actions were meaningless. Three short raps came at my door I opened it to Valera and Cecelia’s husband, Henri.

I gave him a big hug. “ Mistress Desiree’, I’m the bearer of glad tidings for you this evening. ” I gave him a questioning look. “ Soon you’ll be able to exact your revenge upon Cardinal Solielle and Duke Russo. ”

My stomach churned at the mere mention of that sanctimonious priest and that horrible little man of the King’s court. “ I thought they’d been taken care of in Paris? ”

“ No, Mistress Desiree’, but they’ll both be in New York City for the upcoming holidays and I’m sure if they’re invited to a party given by Queen Rose in their honor, they’ll accept with no questions asked. ”

A faint smile played on Valera’s lips. “ Gustav has already begun the preparations for your overnight guests. ”

“ Let that blessed day come with haste! ” I grew weary waiting for a new year with new beginnings.

Kermes Twa spoke. “ Patience, Desiree’. Anticipation is oft times better than the experience itself. ”

Chapter 11

The week passed with studied slowness, each second lengthening into minutes and hours of boring contemplation. I wasn’t allowed to venture outdoors where I might be recognized, thus ruining the intricate plans of Kermes Twa. The Great Goddess was strict in her orders, always doing what

was best for me. The view from my window to the busy street below was mildly entertaining, but I did a double-take on the morning of the children's Christmas party! Who to my wondering eyes should appear but Marcus and Bethanie, gloved hands and coated arms intertwined like two young lovers; laughing and giggling, attached at the hip while fat, white snowflakes swirled around them. My sister, the born actress, and Marcus, my husband without a clue; what a farce. I resisted an overwhelming urge to go downstairs and let them see my face, consequences be damned.

Kermes Twa brought my attention back to the matters at hand and I made one final check in the great-room where the children's Christmas party would be held. Everything was picture perfect, and soon the children would be laughing and singing Christmas carols, eating sugar cookies and spice cake with raisins and walnuts, and sitting on the lap of Santa Claus. Hanging over the fireplace were red and white striped stockings stuffed with fruits, nuts, candies, and small toys for the little ones to play with. The tree was decorated with strings of cranberries and popcorn, edible gingerbread boys and girls, and red and white candles in gold and silver holders. A rounded black medallion with a glowing golden star in its center adorned the top of the tree, the very ornament which had been used in the King's Vampire ceremony inside his Paris castle. That should intrigue the gentlemen who were going to call on me.

I went to the basement door and met Gustav as he clunked upstairs. "Is everything ready for our unwary visitors, Gustav?"

"Yes, Mistress Desiree'. We'll have no trouble from either one of them." He was dusty and dirty from his tasks, but smiled as he left to clean up for his portrayal of Santa. I was well pleased with the arrangements and didn't linger, knowing Valera would use her extensive herbal wisdom to give the men a taste of their own medicine before they became better acquainted with their maker.

A knocking on the front door signaled the arrival of Mother Superior, the convent's nuns, and the well-mannered children. Cardinal Solielle and Duke Russo, the two evil men who'd given me directly into the dirty hands of the King and his villainous cohorts, would arrive long after the children had returned to the orphanage. I clapped my hands for attention. "Children, welcome to my home. Your smiles and laughter will bring added brightness to this Christmas holiday season, because you embody the true spirit of love.

” Sounds of Christmas songs came from the great-room. “ How many of you enjoy singing? ” Every arm was raised and the children and nuns gathered around the piano. Cecelia played and Henri was their choir director. Valera and Mother Superior supervised the cook in the kitchen, and Gustav was in his Santa costume by the time all the carols had been sung two or three times over.

I caught Henri’s eye and he sparkled with good humor. “ Can you guess who’s arrived, children? ” Gustav played Santa to the hilt, then handed out the stockings and the many presents under the tree. After eating cookies and cake, and drinking milk, several of the younger children began to yawn, and it was time for them to travel back to the orphanage. I’d see that more gifts would arrive for them on Christmas morning.

We had an hour before the ‘special guests’ would arrive. I made a quick trip up the back stairway to my own room and knelt in front of the polished brass sea-trunk, which was covered in Dragon Lady Holly. On a crystal plate in the middle were six fat red pillared candles surrounding one larger candle of white. I offered a prayer of supplication and thanksgiving at the holy altar of Kermes Twa, asking her to guide and protect me in the coming week.

The clutter of boxes and gift wrap from the children’s party was gone and the great-room was festooned with greenery which befit the holiday season; pine boughs with cones still attached and fresh spruce and fir branches. Differing breeds of hollyhocks overhung the doorways and decorated the staircase and fireplace mantle-piece. The silver punch bowl was filled to the brim with the world’s finest blood red Burgundy and laced with equal amounts of powdered cowslip flowers and dried jimson weed. I had no wish to bandy about pleasantries with these men as I wanted them to feel the full embodiment of my misery and pain. There was no doubt in my heart and soul the Great Goddess would help me accomplish my retribution.

“ Desiree’, your guests have arrived for tonight’s dinner. ” I smiled and proffered my hand in greeting, glad that neither one of them recognized me in my holiday finery. “ Good evening and welcome to both of you gentlemen. My name is Rose and I’m your hostess. May this holy season bring about the truest dreams of your heart. ” Valera dipped out glassfuls of Monasterium Damnare’ wine for each of them, imported especially from Fredericksburg for this monumental occasion. My drink of choice was the juice of unfermented grapes from the same arbor near Castle Desiree’. “ A

toast to this joyous season of goodwill to men. ” I failed to add that favorable conduct would not be extended to them, however. They drank their fill and Valera served them more. “ Mother Superior told me that you’ve recently arrived from France, on government and church business. I spent some pleasant years there and would love to hear about the social scene from your perspectives. Have a seat and tell me about yourselves, please. ”

“ Miss Rose, your name is famous throughout the entire country of France for your charitable contributions to the poor and needy. ” Cardinal Solielle stood up and walked towards the Christmas tree. “ Although I never attended any of your balls in Paris, I see we share a common interest. ” He fingered my medallion. “ You’re the only civilian the King ever favored with a token of his highest esteem. ” I blushed in convincing profusion.

“ I can see why you caught the King’s fancy, Miss Rose. ” Duke Russo leered in the direction of my low-cut bust line.

“ I only attended one ceremony and was totally surprised to be the recipient of this unusual star. ” I sighed. “ As with most high ranking officials, the King’s attention span lasted but a short while and that’s when I moved to New York to mend my broken heart. ”

Valera entered the room. “ Miss Rose, dinner will be served in one hour. ” She smiled in the direction of our visitors. “ Would you care for more wine? ”

“ Thank you, Valera. Gentlemen? ” They were both eager to consume more of the Burgundy’s intriguing taste and I raised my glass in salute. “ Another toast to France and King. ” They downed their goblets and asked for more. By this time their words were slurred and their eyes heavy in drunken stupor. Their chins fell to their chests when Gustav and Henri drug them down the basement stairs to their final home. After removing their costly dinner jackets and rolling up their shirtsleeves, iron bracelets were attached to their wrists and ankles, securing them to the reinforced wall. They’d wake to an enchanting vision of me, serving them thin tasteless gruel and stale crusts of hardened bread for breakfast.

Valera waited in my room, her job for the evening to keep me calm and focused. She’d prepared a warm bath and I stepped into the soothing liquid.

“ The lemon and lime salts that I added to the water will cleanse your body so your ritual purification can begin. ” She surrounded the claw-foot tub with candles and lit them. “ The greenish-yellow ones will evoke feelings of jealousy, anger, and discord. ” The dark blue candles felt the fire next. “ These are used to promote depression and changeability. ” Last, but certainly in no way least, glowed candles of purest black. “ These will let evil, negativity, and confusion reign in your heart of hearts. ” I soaked in the water as the astringents washed the dirt away from my pores. Swirling smoke infused my lungs, circulating throughout my bloodstream. “ Breathe deeply, Desiree’; let the words from the Great Goddess emanate from your soul to rise and be blessed. ”

‘Great Goddess Kermes Twa
I am your willing pupil, an eager disciple
Fill me to the brim with your special wisdom
May your jealousy, discord, and evil reign supreme
Doing away with love, compassion, and goodness
As you deem fit
Let the hope and joy of your bloodlust conquer all
Bringing fruition to your plans of revenge and retribution’

Valera helped me out of the tub. “ It’s time for you to dwell upon the set deeds you must accomplish this week. ”

I sat unclothed as a newborn baby before the altar of Kermes Twa, attuned to the red of bloodlust and the steady beating of my heart. I began the lighting ceremony at dawn, presenting myself in humble homage to the Great Goddess, thanking her for my life and friends.

Kermes Twa spoke. “ You’ll not be allowed to drink any blood this week, thereby showing me your devoted trust. No matter how hard this trial period becomes, your faith will help you persevere. ” A strand of pure black onyx was clasped around my neck for the mastery of my own self gratification and I felt nothing but the dark aura of the Great Goddess surrounding me as I dressed in the red of velvet passion.

Henri followed me downstairs to the basement, bearing the breakfast fare on an ornate tray, while Gustav brought up the rear.

“ The tiptop of the morning, gentlemen; I trust the sleeping arrangements were to your satisfaction. Being the good hostess that I am, breakfast is

served. ” They stared at me with looks of stunned disbelief, never thinking their sins would find them out. “ Come now, you must know that life brings tit for tat; good for good, and evil for evil. ” Gustav removed one wrist chain so they could eat and drink. We waited and watched for a few minutes, but they were too numb with shock to even lift a finger.

“ I see you’re not inclined to eat and that’s too bad, gentlemen. ” I nodded to Henri and Gustav, who quickly shackled what had been set free. “ I suppose this succulent food and tasty drink isn’t what you’re accustomed to. ” My condescending smile turned into a frown of dismay. “ Please proceed with the morning ritual, Gustav. ” He took a sharp carving knife from the tray and slit each man across his right elbow vein. Their blood spurted into the empty golden bowls that Henri held and when they were filled with bright red liquid, amaranth soaked tourniquets were applied to staunch their flowing life force. I turned around to leave. “ Maybe the rats will enjoy the food these gentlemen rejected. ” We left them to their own miseries and they cried and wailed in earnest, shouting for pity and mercy, but our duties with them were finished for the day. Valera carried the bowls upstairs to my room, then helped me undress. I sat before the sacrificial altar in naked reverence for the symbolic reception.

“ Desiree’, this is just the beginning of your disciple’s journey, but beware of distracting traps and pitfalls that can lead you astray from your preordained destiny. ” A heavy silver chalice was placed on the altar; Valera poured the bowls of blood into it, then added an equal amount of Marcus’s exclusive wine from the previous evening’s festivities. She struck a match and lit the first of the red pillared candles. “ Close your eyes, Desiree’. ” Sweet smells of burning wine-blood mixture made me dizzy with want and need until I felt the hot sting of melted candle-wax. Valera shaped the drippings into a triangle at the juncture of my breasts. “ This is the sign of three, integrated into a part of you forever, Desiree’. The points signify the major forces in your life; past, present, and future. ” She handed me a pencil and a piece of paper. “ Don’t take time to think, but write the first three letters which come to mind. ”

I wrote the letters M, D, and N. “ Tell me what they mean to you. ”

“ M must stand for Marcus, and D for Desiree’. Marcus and I are both part of the past and the present, but the N confuses me. ”

“ We never know what the future holds for us Desiree’. Remember that Kermes Twa is your illumination to all things. ” She left and I sang silent

praises to the Great Goddess.

Valera, Gustav, Henri and I followed the same rites and rituals throughout the week. When Christmas morning arrived, I knew my two houseguests would be meeting their end. I'd be dressed in dirty rags and tatters and hoped that recognition wouldn't take long to set in so my tasks could be accomplished in short order.

“ Why are you doing this to us, Miss Rose? What have we ever done to you? ” The Cardinal whispered in halting chokes and gasps.

“ Let your eyes take good notice, placing me distinctly in your memories. My name is Mistress Desiree', and this week has been for your edification and education. Do you recall our introductions inside the Paris jail cell? All the horrible things you did and had done to me. ” I paused for a minute, then saw terror in their eyes. “ This Christmas day, you've more than earned my gifts of retribution and revenge. ” They said they'd learned their lessons and begged to be set free, thus lowering themselves to the sniveling cowards that they truly were.

“ This isn't my requirement of you or from you. The Great Goddess says this is the true way, the true worship, and the true revelation of who she is and how she loves and protects those who are in her care. Her punishment for your misdeeds has been slow, painful, and harsh, but if it had been left to me, I would have finished you off the first night you set foot in my house. Under the tutelage of Kermes Twa, I've learned the answer is patience of spirit, in all things. ” I smiled when they were hauled to an upright position and as the sharpened point of Gustav's carefully crafted wooden stake was driven home, the exploding spray of their black-tinged blood soaked me so I could offer myself in full to Kermes Twa.

The ceiling and walls dripped bright red in conjunction with my body, and I reveled in pure bloodlust which calmed and soothed my soul and spirit. After Gustav and Henri removed the dead bodies, they set up the sacred altar of Kermes Twa in the basement and I fell to my knees, raising my hands and face in supplication. Valera lit the last candle, signifying the white of finality, then handed me the silver chalice. I placed it upon the altar, then mixed their corrupted life force with equal parts of Monasterium Damnare' wine. Kermes Twa spoke directly to me. “ Drink to your departure and arrival, Desiree'. Going and coming will bring the blessed peace of righteous vindication. ” I drank and drank, but the chalice remained filled to the brim.

Valera added fresh rose petals and almonds to the mixture and it was ignited by the breath of the Great Goddess. “ Kneel and bow your head in thanksgiving and adoration. ” I did and she anointed me with the flaming life force. “ The molten blood of Kermes Twa flows in you and on you, bonding you with life everlasting. ”

Henri extended his hands. “ Rise for the Sleep of Transformation. ” I stepped into the opened altar trunk, the white silk-lined resting place for my next seven weeks. I lay my head on the black pillow and closed my eyes, then Gustav took the chalice and sealed my coffin with a bright red lava flow, creating a floating liquid dream of blood perfected peace.

I awoke from quiet darkness, as weak light slowly filtered into the trunk where I slept. My name was called from a great distance. “ You have completed the required thirty-five days of transformation. Arise and prepare yourself for what lies ahead, Desiree’ . ” Kermes Twa spoke, but a male hand was proffered.

I rose from my resting place, seeing Gustav stand before me. “ You’re a vision of loveliness, Countess Desiree’ . ”

He led the way upstairs to my room and opened the door. I peered inside and saw everything had been rearranged. “ Please send Valera or Cecelia to me. ”

“ Mistress Desiree’ , that’s an impossibility. They’ve gone on a short trip with Mother Superior and the orphans and won’t return until later tomorrow evening. ”

I sighed, but felt I could function by myself for that short period of time. “ They’re deserving of time off, and so are you, Gustav. ”

He seemed upset with that notion. “ No, Mistress, someone must be with you at all times per orders of the Great Goddess. ” He smiled. “ I’ve had my own vacation of sorts, fishing along the coastal waters of the Atlantic Ocean. ” He headed towards the door, whistling the same sea shanty I remembered hearing from my uncle’s lips onboard the deck of Goddess of the Sea.

I grabbed his sleeve. “ Where did you learn that song, Gustav? ”

“ Just a little ditty I picked up when I went fishing with your Uncle Joshua. I was trying out some new bait in order to catch the big ones! ”

I sat down, stunned and more than a bit surprised that Gustav would know my uncle, let alone go fishing with him. “ Mistress Desiree’, don’t be upset. We met quite by accident, and I had no inkling he was your uncle until he told me of his dearly departed niece who meant so much to him and his family, almost as if she were a second daughter. ” Tears filled my eyes as I thought of my Aunt Madeliane, my Uncle Joshua, and most of all, my Cousin Annelle, who’d become my blood sister. Gustav sat beside me, holding me as I cried. When I calmed down, he said, “ Your uncle conveyed some very interesting and important news concerning your husband and your sister. ”

My tears ceased altogether and I dried my eyes with the handkerchief he supplied. “ Go ahead, Gustav, I’m listening. ”

“ This Saturday evening, January 31st, they are to become engaged and will be married on Valentine’s Day. ”

My laugh was cruel with hatred for the both of them. What came to mind was the fact that Marcus would be a bigamist, which wouldn’t bode well for the history books or our family tree, especially if children issued forth from this most wicked coupling. “ And just where is this most uncalled for event to take place, Gustav? ”

“ At your father’s house in Springfield, of course. ” He saw what was written on my face. “ I don’t like that scowl, Mistress. I hope you won’t do anything of a foolish nature. ” He thought for a minute. “ At least wait until Valera and Cecelia come home and discuss this matter with them. ”

“ That will be all, Gustav. ” I gentled my tone. “ Thank you for your kindness and consideration in everything you’ve done for me. ” I kissed his stubbly cheek and he closed the door on his way out. I knew it was Wednesday as I glanced at the clock on my dresser, but was it 11am or 11 pm? I pushed the curtains aside to reveal a black night, lit only by a tiny sprinkling of stars in the heavens. Kermes Twa prodded my mind into fastly shifting gears. At 4 am I could slip away to the train station and not be

missed until the sun rose on the Eastern horizon Thursday morning. From there I'd head north, reaching Springfield, Massachusetts, by Friday afternoon. Come Saturday morning I'd hire a carriage to take me my father's version of a wealthy Victorian mansion with all the comforts money could buy. It was almost ten miles northeast of Springfield proper with fruit orchards and fields for grazing, miles of wooded land, and acres of gardens.

I wondered if I'd be able to see a reflection of myself in the full-length mirror on the wall. I vividly remembered going to sleep, still dressed in my rags and tatters, but the vision I saw before me was outfitted for traveling in the finest red velvet. The long v-neck collar with the inserted bodice was decorated in ivory braided trim. The skirting was pleated in the back, adding fullness to the latest style of the day. Kermes Twa knew I'd be making this trip and had clothed me accordingly. The red velvet muff and hat were both trimmed with white mink and matched the dress. My ebony hair hung in looping curls and the eerie alabaster glow on my skin had the palest hint of pink, so I wouldn't appear like a ghost. I said a small prayer of praise.

“ Great Goddess Kermes Twa
Protectress of all who love and adore you
I wear the color of your blood
on the inside and the outside
My full devotion
My everlasting life
Entirely yours. ”

The very thought of this journey revolted me, but there was no other way out of this sticky predicament. I grabbed my purse and overnight bag, peeked down the hallway to make sure the coast was clear, then ran on quiet feet to the street below where vendors were already hawking their wares before the early dawn of day. I paid no attention to the throngs on their way to work as I quickly made my way to the train station, less than a mile from home. “ I need a ticket to Springfield, Massachusetts. ”

I paid my fare to the ticket agent. “ Train 18 leaves in thirty minutes on the track outside the far doors. ” A porter helped me board, then showed me to my own private sleeping quarters. I put my bag and purse on the opposite seat and looked out the window as the train pulled away from the NYC station. I was leaving a significant part of my life behind, but welcomed the pathway towards a new beginning. I'd never been privileged to travel alone

and felt quite grand as the steel wheels clicked and clacked on the silver rails. The day sped by amidst a fine dusting of powdery snow-frosted trees and afternoon brightness gave way to lengthening sundown shadows. A knock on the door startled me. “ Who is it? ”

“ Porter come to make up your bed for the evening. ” He made up the berth and I asked him when the train would pull into Springfield. “ We’re stopping overnight in Hartford, Connecticut, in hopes that the snow will quit falling and if it does we’ll be in Springfield by noon tomorrow. ”

“ Thank you. ” I smiled and handed him a tidy tip, but my mind was focused on Marcus and Bethanie and how best to confront them.

“ Relax, Desiree’. Your nature now is one of calm confidence. Breathe deeply and let my peace wash over you. ” Sweetly soothing, Kermes Twa flowed through every cell in my body, infusing me with her spirit. Snowflakes danced and swirled outside my window, reminding me of the day Bethanie and Marcus stood as close as newlyweds outside my window in NYC. My feelings of blinding fury were whittled down to blood-dripping dagger-fangs. A gloating screech invaded the silence. “ My kind of peace only comes with blood-letting! ”

The train jerked to a sudden stop and I barely recognized Springfield. It had grown by leaps and boundaries, sprawling in all directions. I left my compartment and walked past new storefronts and houses that lined the street, almost missing the entrance to Springfield House because the name had been changed to The Bethanie Inn. I rolled my eyes in disgust, thinking that my loving husband had given it to Bethanie as a wedding present.

The lobby was tastefully decorated and the clerk behind the counter smiled in heart-stopping recognition! “ Good afternoon, Miss Terrance. ” He rushed right on by, and fairly shouted, “ It’s so nice of you to grace us with your presence today. What may I do for you? ”

“ Nothing at all. I’m waiting for my friend, Sheridan Canossa, so we can finalize some last minute plans for my bridal shower tonight. ”

“ Of course, and then your engagement party is tomorrow night? I wish you and your fiancé a happy and blessed life. ”

“ Thank you. ” She seemed distracted and walked towards the plate glass window near the hotel front. Sheridan darted in and I averted my face as she and Bethanie stepped past the counter to a door marked private. They entered it together and it closed with a loud click.

I asked the clerk if there was a room available. He turned the pages in his guest register. “ Yes, Miss...”

“ Valentine, Miss Rose Valentine. ”

“ How long will you be staying with us, Miss Valentine? ”

“ I’ll pay you one week in advance, then I’ll let you know. ”

“ You’re lucky as most of the rooms in Springfield were booked months in advance for the engagement party and wedding of the young lady who was just here. She’s going to marry Count Marcus of Fredericksburg. He’s one of the most prominent men in town and in fact, he owns this inn. ”

I wanted to say I knew all about the unhappy event, but chose my words carefully. “ A special time for the young lady to look forward to, then. ” The clerk rang a bell, and one of the hired boys took my small bag upstairs to a second floor room. I parted the heavy maroon curtains and felt long forgotten memories stir within my heart. I left the building and hired a horse and buggy at the livery stable, then drove north beyond my father’s house to the rim of Coltsfoot Canyon. I’d spent many pleasant summer hours walking the paths that led to the rocky bottom, then crossed the lavender and lilac fields to cool off in the gushing waterfalls. It was near dusk by the time I arrived back in town and I dropped the horse and buggy off at the stable, then told the owner’s son I’d have need of him the next evening.

Alone in my room, questions about life and living surfaced, but no answers were forthcoming. “ Desiree’, focus on regaining your rightful place beside Marcus. Concentrate on him, picture him, love him. ” I obeyed the Great Goddess and my trance ended twenty-four hours later. “ Desiree’, go to your father’s house and stay out of sight until you see your sister, Bethanie, then follow her. ”

No one took a second glance in my direction as I was let off in front of my father’s gaily lit house. I slipped around back and hid in the holly bushes,

imagining Bethanie dressing to impress my husband. I lost track of time, but the smell of Night Blooming Jasmine reached my nostrils right before I clearly saw her. She wore a black shirt and trousers instead of a fancy ball-gown and ran on nimble feet to the canyon's rim. Rumbles of thunder grumbled and groaned from dark grey storm-clouds and huge droplets of cold biting rain pelted my skin. I grabbed her arm, then turned her face to mine. " Bethanie, there's no way in heaven or hell I'll see you married to Marcus! "

She clawed and scratched like a hellcat, then pierced the night with a bloodcurdling scream. I let go of her when a blinding flash of light revealed the scornful blonde beauty of Sheridan. " This time around you'll get what you so righteously deserve! " She tackled me with the strength of a man and I went sailing over the canyon's edge into the black ravine. There was nothing to grab hold of and in a few short seconds I hit the jagged rocks below. Searing pain racked my body as cohesive thoughts failed to register in my mind.

My brains were a jumbled mess as I was bounced and jostled. I opened my eyes, then tried to sit up, but saw a man staring down at me with a worried frown on his face. " Please stay still, Miss Bethanie. You're safely inside my carriage and I'm taking you straightaway to your father's house, so the search can be called off. When we arrive I'll send my son to fetch Dr. Johnson, but till then I can only pray that nothing is dreadfully wrong with you. "

I laughed until I cried as strange words circulated inside my tired mind. " If Marcus only knew, then what would he do? " My head pounded in earnest and I passed into the darkness once again.

My nightmare dreams were tangled into odd realities. I woke up to a graphic hallucination of unknown white-coated strangers leaning over me and wondered if this was my mode of transportation to heaven? I closed my eyes for a few minute's worth of contrite contemplation, but when I opened them, I saw the same faces hovering over me, speaking in hushed tones.

" I think she's coming out of the coma. Go find Count Marcus. " Finally, a

name I recognized.

“ Where am I? ” No response came forth as people scurried to and fro, not paying the slightest bit of attention to me. I sat up, swung my feet over the edge of a bed, then walked on steady legs to the windowsill. Moderate sunlight spilled through the lacy curtains, allowing me to drink in a beautiful scene of distant snow-capped mountains; closer inland were trees of pine, oak, and hickory. Familiar memories crashed through my mind as I looked straight down at the well-trimmed green holly bushes, adorned with red berry clusters. My skin crawled and I crumbled into a weakened heap on Bethanie’s bare bedroom floor.

Heavy boots pounded up the stairs. “ Bethanie, my Love! ” Marcus gathered me into his strong arms and held me tightly against his chest. “ You’re finally awake. ” He gazed at me in astonished wonderment, seeing a grand illusion and vision of his beloved and cherished Bethanie.

With every ounce of my being, I wanted to scream out, “ I’m Desiree’, your wife, and as my husband, you should recognize and love me, not my sister! ”

His mouth crushed mine and I knew he must have read my thoughts. “ My prayers have been answered, Bethanie, ” he murmured against my hair.

“ Daughter, I’ve been heartsick with worry about you. ” My father came into her room right after Marcus and squeezed the breath out of my lungs.

His embrace revolted me and I thought of breaking loose, but took a deep breath to calm myself. “ Papa, I’m so glad that you and Marcus are here with me. ” To have everyone believe I was Bethanie made my soul churn in conflicted emotions. For a minute I actually felt good, but I well remembered the misery and sorrow that permeated my life in this house of gloom and doom and like the proverbial ostrich I wanted to stick my head in the sand, pretending that the difficulties in my world no longer existed.

“ Being a mousy creature doesn’t suit you, Desiree’! ” Kermes Twa sounded exasperated. “ Tread carefully and you’ll have the sweetest revenge of all; knowing everything, while Marcus won’t have a clue as to who and what you really are. ” She barked a last order. “ Now get in the act of behaving like your sister! ”

My father handed me back to Marcus and against the will of my better judgment I melted into him. The Great Goddess was well pleased with my actions. “ Desiree’, this is the curving pathway to your destiny. ”

“ Please come back to bed, Bethanie. You need to lie down and rest, so we can talk about our upcoming nuptials. ” Marcus was always the great protector of specific plans. How could I reply when I had no answers to questions of elapsed time? Or the unknown whereabouts of my devious sister, and would-be-killer sister-in-law?

I sighed. “ Marcus, my memories are hazy. ” I put my hand to my forehead and winced. He led me to Bethanie’s bed, then tucked me in like a little girl.

At that moment Regina came in with a tray of food and drinks and set it down on the dresser. “ Girlie, are you all right? ” She fussed over me with comforting hugs and loving kisses in abundance, the same kind of concerned affection that she’d displayed for my sister after our mother had died. “ Bethanie, you need to eat and regain your strength, especially if you and Count Marcus are still going to be married on Valentine’s Day. ”

“ How long have I been asleep? ”

“ My Darling, you were missing for three days after our engagement party and Mr. Larsen found you on Tuesday, February 3rd. This morning is Wednesday, February 11th, and you’ve been asleep in your room for the past eight days. ” He kissed my hands. “ Dr. Johnson gave you a thorough physical examination and said you had plenty of scrapes, scratches, and bruises and you’d be sore for weeks to come, but what worried him most was the fact you showed no signs of waking up. Now that you’ve been alert for some time, I know you’ll be fine. ” His eyes glistened with tears and he tenderly touched the bump on my forehead. I flung my arms around his neck and kissed him for all I was worth, igniting the blazing passion and love that had been bottled up inside of me. “ Bethanie, you are the Love of my life, for eternity and beyond. ” Her name was a flashflood of frozen tundra and I speculated on how long I could keep up this numbing charade. Marcus sensed the 180 degree change in my disposition. “ Bethanie, you’re overwrought and need sustenance. ” He dangled purplish red grapes above my mouth, removing one from the stem and bringing it to my parted lips. I bit into its juicy sweetness, savoring the mellow flavor which reminded me

of the grape arbors and winery in Fredericksburg. Marcus kept feeding me grapes, cheeses, baked chicken, and crusty bread, still warm from the oven. I drank cold fresh milk, and finally felt a tad bit more in control of myself; more like the me Marcus had fallen in love with and married.

Even though a slight form of nourishment raced through my tainted system, I'd soon be in need of fresh blood and Valera's herbal remedies to stay alive. Lady's Bedstraw stimulated my appetite and kept my victim's blood circulating for longer periods of time, requiring less life force than was normal for a Vampire and her concoction of Marsh Trefoil and Yellow Gentian allowed my body to absorb vitamins and minerals from the food I ate. Valera's secret remedy for my internal blood-flow allowed me access to unlimited daylight with no repercussions.

Questions unrelentingly peppered my brain; would she and Gustav be able to trace my whereabouts and how was I going to explain my unexplainable problems to Marcus and Papa's satisfaction? Marcus intruded on my train of thought. "Bethanie, is there something on your mind, something you want to say to me?" Marcus was loving and gentle, the way he'd always been since we'd first been properly introduced.

I attempted a smile, but my lips trembled and he wiped away the tears that fell from my eyes. I laid my head on his shoulder and breathed in the warm scent of his neck, watching his pulse point beat rapidly in conjunction with his heart. I envisioned the linking act, growing dizzy with urgent need as I slid my tongue along his prominent vein, oblivious to everyone else in the room.

"Bethanie?" Her name was a question on his lips and his hands applied a vise grip to my upper arms. My eyes were glazed and unfocused and Marcus pulled away from me. "Regina, she's feverish. Please bring her some cool compresses."

"Yes, Count Marcus, right away." She left Bethanie's room.

"My Love, you've tried to accomplish too much in too short a time." He lowered my head to the pillow, provoking irrational thoughts into a vexation of red frenzy. I breathed in ragged intonations and clutched at him in anxious confusion.

“ Marcus...” I had every intention of telling him the complete truth, but Regina walked through the door, followed closely by Valera and Gustav.

Regina spoke up and I didn't utter another word. “ Bethanie, these fine people have come to say prayers with you. ” She placed cool cloths on my forehead, neck and wrists. “ I hope you don't mind that they've spoken to God on your behalf, asking that you be healed. ”

Gustav stood on one side of me, and Valera on the other. She placed my left hand in hers and applied loving pressure. My entire being relaxed, knowing that everything would be all right. “ Count Marcus, I'm a firm believer in using natural herbs and remedies to help heal the body and mind. Please let me treat Bethanie this way and see how she responds. ”

Papa said, “ What's your opinion, Marcus? ”

“ Could you help me, really? ” I asked before Marcus could answer. He seemed skeptical, but gave his full approval and I smiled. “ Marcus, I love you. ”

His lips were soft and sweet as they met mine. He smoothed my hair, then replaced the warm compresses with cool ones. “ I'll leave you in Regina's capable hands and attend to the many details surrounding our wedding. Sleep well, my bride to be. ” He chastely kissed my cheek and left.

I felt abandoned and it must have showed on my face. “ Girlie, what's wrong? You look as if Marcus will never come back. ”

I sighed. “ Regina, this whole episode has left me with shambled thoughts and feelings. ” She held me, and for the first time in my life I felt the motherly touch that Bethanie had continuous access to while we were growing up. My emotions overflowed into hot heavy tears that released years of pain and frustration.

Valera took Regina aside. “ Would you mind if I sent Gustav to fetch my herbs? I can make a tea that will soothe Bethanie's nerves and help her sleep. ”

“ Seeing as Count Marcus and Bethanie's Papa have given their consent, you may do as you see fit. ”

“ Gustav, get my bag and meet me in the kitchen. I’ll make the herbal remedy for Bethanie, then bring it up to her. ” Gustav, Valera, and Regina left me alone with my father.

“ Papa, I have a favor to ask of you. ” I knew he’d grant Bethanie anything.

“ Of course, Bethanie. All you ever have to do is ask to receive. ”

“ Regina said that Valera and Gustav came everyday and prayed for my recovery. Would you allow them to live here until my wedding to Marcus takes place? ” I used my Bethanie charm.

“ Yes, Daughter. If that makes you happy, they may stay as long as you want. ” From that moment on I knew I could have it all, taking full advantage of Bethanie’s position within the framework of my family, playing the game of musical personalities like a leading actress who performs best in her onstage element. Hardness and stubbornness crept on cat’s paws into my heart and soul. I was slowly stooping to Bethanie’s level, becoming more and more like her, and less and less like myself.

Valera handed me a mug of steaming tea when she and Regina returned to the bedroom. I sipped the hot liquid while Regina and Papa hovered over me. “ This tastes wonderful. ” I yawned in contentment, put the cup down and held out my arms, then kissed them both on the cheek. “ Papa. Regina. I love you. ”

“ I’ll stay with Bethanie and make sure she’s resting comfortably. ” Valera held my hand and I smiled at her.

Papa followed Regina into the hallway and Valera quietly closed my door. I quickly sat up in bed. “ Valera, you’re a sight for my sore eyes and aching heart. ”

“ I can say the same for you, Desiree’. ” Her tone changed considerably. “ Coming here was a mistake! Instead of clearly analyzing your feelings after Gustav informed you of the special engagement party for Marcus and Bethanie, you reacted rashly, seeking retaliation and revenge. ” Valera’s temper rose and I knew she was more than peeved. “ Please justify your motivation in leaving New York City before Cecelia and I returned from our

trip with the orphans. ”

“ Valera, everything worked to my benefit. In their minds and hearts I’m Bethanie, and I’m going to play that part to the hilt. ” I thought I had complete control of the situation.

“ Desiree’, no one on this earth ever has complete control of any given situation. ” Valera was a very wise woman. “ Gustav and I boarded the train late Thursday evening after he told us you’d disappeared. In her great love for you, Kermes Twa led us to the Bethanie Inn where the hotel clerk said you’d left for Miss Terrance’s house. When you didn’t come back to your room on Saturday night I believed the worst had happened. ” She dabbed a handkerchief to the corners of her eyes. “ Desiree’, I love you as much as I love Cecelia. You’re like a second daughter to me. ”

“ Valera, you’ve been like a mother to me and I’m truly sorry that I gave you cause to worry. ” A steely glint hardened my countenance. “ Animosity was a direct route to Springfield when I found out about Bethanie and Marcus, but in all honesty I had no idea what I was going to do once I arrived. ”

“ Desiree’, you can’t let your emotions overrule your common sense; heed the advice Kermes Twa imparts to you. ” Valera wanted to save me from myself.

The wind had been let out of my sails and I was fastly drifting off to sleep. “ Valera, can we talk about this in the morning? ”

She kissed me on the cheek. “ Desiree’, I’ll stay with you while you sleep and we’ll discuss your predicament tomorrow. ” I got the distinct impression she didn’t fully trust me.

Chapter 12

Thursday, February 12th

Bright sunlight streamed through my window, stabbing my eyes and hurting my mind. I cringed, then pulled the covers over my head and retreated into a safe cocoon of darkness. “ I’ve lost my ability to function in the daylight, Valera. ”

“ Desiree’, the Blood of Transformation is wearing off. I’ll return with your potion in a few minute’s time, but Gustav won’t be able to supply you with fresh human blood until later on this evening. ” A deep-seated hunger gnawed at my heart and soul, then spread to my stomach as I pictured sinking my fangs into pulsing jugular veins.

Valera made her exit. Bethanie’s room was cloying, a claustrophobic void that left me with no particular love or need for anyone or anything except blood. A sharp rapping sounded at the door. I couldn’t make out the indistinct voices and lowered the blanket to my chin to see who’d invaded my privacy. Regina tiptoed in, closely followed by Papa. I wondered if Marcus was going to make a grand entrance as well.

“ Bethanie, you’re pale as a ghost. ” Regina felt my forehead. “ And colder than ice. You need a warm bath, Girlie. ”

What I required couldn’t be provided by either of them. The sight, the smell, the sound, the touch and taste of a certain life force was what I needed to satisfy my urgent red desire. I flung the covers back, swung my legs and feet to the polished floor, then stood to heed the thrumming call. I blacked out, but heard Marcus speaking from a great distance. “ Bethanie, my Love. You must stay in bed for your sake as well as mine so our wedding can proceed. ”

I regained consciousness, wanting more than anything to tell him we had no need of a wedding because we were already husband and wife. I beat my fists against his chest in utter dismay, exhausting my last bit of energy. Cold dread washed over me in the invisible form of Kermes Twa. “ Desiree’, Marcus is so focused on Bethanie that he won’t allow himself the luxury of believing that you’re still alive, so you’ll have to become your sister for him. He’ll be played for the fool he is, until it’s too late for him to turn back from the chosen path that leads to his damnation and redemption. ”

“ Count Marcus, I’ve brought Bethanie her morning’s vitamins and herbs, guaranteed to perk her up. ” I drank what Valera provided and a rush of unbridled energy surged through my veins, adding a tinge of blush to my cheeks and pinkness to my skin.

Regina took my hand in hers, sounding a positive note. “ Oh, Girlie, I do believe you’ll be fine with plenty of bed rest and proper nourishment. I’ll have Cook make your favorite breakfast dish. ”

“ Thank you, Regina. ” I was usually relegated to my room for mealtimes, so had no idea what kind of food she’d bring for me to eat.

Papa came and sat beside me, beaming from ear to ear. “ Bethanie, your wedding dress is arriving later this afternoon and I know you’ll be the most beautiful bride Springfield has ever seen, your Mother being the exception of course. ” My parents’ wedding portrait was done in oils and hung over the mantle-piece in their bedroom. Mother was exquisitely dressed in a white silk gown with deep red roses and pure white lilies for her bridal bouquet. He turned to Marcus. “ I have no doubts that the wedding will proceed as planned. ” Papa got up and kissed my cheek. “ Bethanie, I’ll return this evening to see how you’re feeling. ”

Regina entered the room right after Papa left. Glass and silverware rattled as Marcus took the tray from her and set it beside my bed. The steak tartar soaked in its own red juices and I knew the blood would add extra nourishment to my system. Marcus cut the meat into bite-sized pieces, speared it with the fork and guided it to my open mouth. My stomach growled in eager anticipation as I tasted the tender texture; it was a poor substitute for what I needed and craved, but it managed to take the edge off. “ My dear, I’m happy that you’re feeling and might I add, looking in the pink again. ”

I recoiled in bitter distaste! Pink was a watered-down imitation of red, a duplication of the way that Marcus’s love for Bethanie paled in comparison to what he felt for me. Kermes Twa was all-wise. “ Desiree’, your Bethanie act will last just a while, but soon you’ll resurface in crimson to reclaim what’s rightfully yours. ” I ate with gusto and purpose, believing that Bethanie would be demoted to the chorus line shadows, as it was always meant to be.

“ Bethanie, you’re as beautiful as a pink-winged butterfly in all her gossamer glory. ” Marcus brushed his lips against mine and the world faded from view. I moved my body next to his, ready to...

“ Patience, Desiree’, patience. Bethanie would never display private emotions in front of onlookers. Bide your time, exercising caution and control, and then Marcus will belong to you; body, blood, heart and soul. ” Kermes Twa laid down her law.

“ Marcus, you’re making me blush. ” With my arms around his neck I kissed him discreetly, seething in bitter disappointment because I wanted, needed, and desired so much more. I placed my head on his shoulder and inspected the regularity of his neck-vein’s heartbeat right in front of my eyes. Once I partook of his life force I’d become his addiction of choice, my name on his lips and in his blood.

He gently ran his fingers through my hair, reminding me of when we were first married. I felt soothed for a few minutes, but jealous thoughts soon began to churn in bitter agitation. Bethanie’s room was a vile sickness I couldn’t endure for any length of time. “ Marcus, could we please go for a short carriage ride in the fresh air? ”

I saw Valera shaking her head no, but knew I’d lose all control if I stayed cooped up in Bethanie’s room. Marcus leaned over, smelling of cinnamon and spice. “ If you are strong enough to walk downstairs by yourself, I’ll consider your proposal. ” How I longed to blurt out the truth, consequences be damned! “ Valera, would you please help Bethanie dress? ”

“ Yes, Count Marcus. ” I knew I’d receive a tongue lashing.

“ Bethanie, I’ll meet you in the parlor. ” Marcus closed the door behind him and left me with an angry Valera.

“ Desiree’, I don’t like being left out of your decision making as it always leads to danger or disaster. ” She frowned.

“ Valera, if I could manage to stay in Bethanie’s room without going insane, I would. ” I put my hand over my heart, hoping she’d understand. “ I swear on the holy blood of Kermes Twa that I’ll behave while I’m with Marcus. ” My eyes revealed I wasn’t lying. “ He thinks I’m weak and won’t keep me outside for long. ” Even venturing into Bethanie’s closet filled me with disgust. Her taste in clothing ran to the lighter spectrum of colors, while I preferred darkly bright and bold to match my personality. “ Could you select a dress for me to wear? ” Valera came back with a few simple styles made of heavy grade cotton. One was pale yellow with dark gold trim on the hem and sleeve ends and the next was light blue with white collar and trim. The third one immediately caught my eye and I held the shaped material in front of me, staring into the mirror. It was pine green, matching the shade of the

holly leaves outside the window. Stripes of deep red ran from the collarless neckline to the hem of the belling skirt, the color of the berries which adorned the bushes. It suited my nature to perfection, but why had it been hanging in Bethanie's closet?

“ This dress becomes you, Desiree’; it’s a personal present to you from the Great Goddess, herself. ” Valera turned me this way and that, inspecting me until I met with her satisfaction.

Regina stopped me at the bottom of the stairs. “ Girlie, I don’t remember this outfit. It’s almost as if it belonged to...” Regina would never say my name and I’m sure that Bethanie’s resentful hostilities had rubbed off on her.

“ Regina, you’re sadly mistaken in believing that this dress belonged to my sister; it’s a get-well gift from Valera. She said it would bring out the emerald hue of my eyes, and I agree wholeheartedly with her assessment. ” I kissed her cheek and held her tightly. “ No matter what I wear, I’ll always be me on the inside, no one else. ”

Marcus held out his hands to me. “ Bethanie, you’ve never looked better. The horse and carriage await. ” He loosely handled the reins, letting the horse trot towards the apple orchard to the very spot where Sheridan had pushed me off the cliff. “ Shall we stroll, my Love? ” Marcus guided me towards the rim and quickly turned me around, his face contorted in barely controlled fury. “ Explain why you came out here in the middle of the night, after telling everyone you were so ill at our engagement party. ”

A bolt of inspiration struck me. “ I really don’t know, Marcus. One minute I was asleep and the next thing I remember clearly is waking up in bed with strangers surrounding me. I thought I’d died and gone to heaven because everyone was dressed in white like God’s Winged Angels. ” Of course I didn’t bother to add that appearances can be deceiving; the fiercest of wolves are many times viewed as the meekest of sheep.

“ Yes, Bethanie. Dr. Johnson said you might have been sleepwalking, but I thought if I brought you here, your memories might be stirred. ” His demeanor changed as my story clarified what he had hoped was true.

It was doubtful that Bethanie had been walking in her sleep as she definitely recognized me that night. “ Marcus, could we talk of other things? Like our

honeymoon perhaps? ”

His answer more than surprised me and his laugh boomed in echoes across the canyon. “ Bethanie, you always have a knack for easing my burdens. We’re sailing onboard your father’s clippership, Goddess of the Sea to visit my childhood home in Fredericksburg. ”

I shivered inside my soul as memories of that evil place crashed over me in haunting tidal waves. When Marcus and I first met, Castle Desiree’ was my dream of heaven on earth, but Sheridan had kept a secret part of it as a living hell, making me the primary centerpiece in her sordid plans for murder at Monasterium Damnare’; Monastery of the Damned. Her attempt to kill me didn’t pan out and she offered to accompany me on a Christmas shopping trip to Paris when Marcus had to bow out for business purposes. It was there that she and her brother had me thrown into prison to cover his debts.

Marcus interrupted my train of thought. “ Sheridan wanted to stay and nursemaid you back to health, but was gracious enough to return to Castle Desiree’ to prepare it for our homecoming. I thought we’d give her the biggest surprise in her life as she has no idea you’ve awakened and will be fine. ” My face registered complete shock; if Marcus only knew the whole truth of the matter. Sheridan would more than likely nurse me to my death as she only wanted the worst for me in order for her to have the best with Marcus.

“ Bethanie, please don’t be distressed; as my wedding gift to you, I’m having a house built on Mount Salem for us to live in. When it’s finished, we’ll return to the United States. ”

“ Marcus, a house on Mount Salem? ” I threw my arms around his neck and met no resistance as I opened my mouth to his explorations.

“ My Darling, this is just a foretaste of how I’ll make you feel when we become husband and wife. ” How I’d missed the physical intimacy we’d shared; one more smoldering kiss from him and I knew my Bethanie act would be making its final curtain call. I trembled with want and need of him and fortunately he mistook my body’s reaction as a sign I was growing tired. “ It’s time we returned to your father’s house, Bethanie. ”

Valera greeted us at the door. “ Bethanie, you look flushed. Maybe you

should take a nap before supper. ” The moment I entered Bethanie’s room I steeled my feelings, knowing my ridiculous pretense had to continue for a while.

Marcus took my hands and modestly kissed my cheek. “ I must attend to business dealings in town, but will make it a priority to return later and check on you, Bethanie. ” He leaned close to my ear and whispered, “ I love you, Darling, now and always. ”

He shut the door on his way out and Valera turned to face me. “ Tomorrow when you and Marcus celebrate your wedding vows, you’ll do so in conjunction with the Great Goddess herself. ” I had no knowledge of what she spoke of. “ Desiree’, the union of male and female is what endows every world with the balance it needs in order to achieve wholeness and as such Kermes Twa married Aquealis, the God of Balance. The 30 days between January 15th and February 14th marks the ‘sacrare marier monap.’ This sacred marriage month symbolizes the blessed union of Kermes Twa and Aquealis and their purification rites must be followed exactly. ”

I began removing my coat, hat, and gloves. “ Yes, Valera. This room makes me feel unclean on the outside and polluted on the inside. ”

“ That’s all for now, Desiree’. ” She motioned me to my desk where there was one sheet of unused writing paper, a pen and unstoppered inkwell. “ Give me your right hand. ” She held up a small silver knife and the metal was cleansed as flames from the fireplace licked its sharpness. She slit me directly on my scarred wrist, and bright red liquid flowed into the empty well. “ To begin the ritual, you must search hard within yourself for the one thing that troubles your heart and soul the most. Write it down, fold the paper in half and give it to me. ”

There were quite a few things to pick and choose from in my life, but I narrowed it down to four probabilities. The first to cross my mind was the treatment I’d received at the hands of the demonic cult of monks; although they’d encountered their final demise, there was no reversal for my being a vampire. Second was Sheridan and Phillippe; their evil deeds had brought me close to death and I wanted to avenge myself against both of them. Third was Bethanie; she’d been just an irritating thorn in my side until she and Sheridan teamed up to outnumber me. Fourth was my relationship with Marcus. I knew that he loved me once and could and would love me again,

but what concerned me most was babies; would I ever be blessed with children after all that my body had endured and even if I was, would they be normal? I dipped the pen and wrote my thoughts in blood, then handed Valera the creased paper. She carefully nestled it inside a white linen-lined red heart-shaped box, then poured the remainder of my inkwell blood on top and closed the lid.

“ This represents what you hold most dear, Desiree’ . ” She threw it into the brightly burning fireplace logs. “ Let this be an easement to your soul. ” Valera called the servants to bring hot water up for me to bathe in.

She added lavender bath salts to the steaming liquid, the scent that Marcus preferred above all others and although it made my heart happy, I felt cheated and at a loss to think he’d want Bethanie to be associated with it.

“ Valera, do you have any rose scented beads that can be added? ”

“ Desiree’ , that’s of no consequence now. ” In one hand she held a long cylindrical vial of yellow, pink, and white beads and in the other hand a vial of brown and red beads; she shook both of them into the bathwater, mixed it all together with a silver rod and let it steep for a few minutes.

“ The emotional cleansing essence of Evening Primrose and the beneficial aspects of Amaryllis will reconnect you to living life one day at a time, while ridding you of unwanted opinions or fixed ideas. The Crested Prickle Poppy reveals your dark shadow side to help you work positively through your dream state and Fireweed is a restoration essence that supports your ability to successfully start over when life’s destructive events destroy and defile. ” Valera helped me undress the rest of the way and I stepped into the fragrant water. “ Let the ritual words come to you. ”

‘Great Goddess Kermes Twa

Let the mysteries of my heart and soul unfold to you

Set me free from disruptive and unwise thoughts

Infuse me with your blood

So I may enter my marriage vows

with the balance that male and female love brings’

I relaxed in a misguided assumption that I’d sidestepped Valera’s inquisition, but she brought me back to the present moment. “ Desiree’ , quit your stalling; speak up while everyone’s gone to town and we have privacy. ” She gave me a stern look that said she meant business.

My mind was transported back to that fateful night. “ Kermes Twa told me I must go to my father’s house and stay out of sight, hiding in the holly bushes by the backside corner of the house until I saw Bethanie. ” I laughed out loud.

“ What’s so funny about this situation? ” Valera halted my musings.

“ With Bethanie becoming engaged, I imagined she’d be impressive in all her ball gown finery, but I was surprised beyond measure to see she wore a man’s black shirt and pants. ” I rolled my eyes. “ She was the devious one, wanting to blend in with the night so she wouldn’t be seen. ”

“ Go on, Desiree’ . ” Valera listened intently.

“ She ran down the path that led to Coltsfoot Canyon and I followed her at a discreet distance. A sudden spring storm lit up the area with bolts of lightning and black and grey thunderheads emitted grumbling rumbles that overflowed with huge droplets of cold biting rain. I caught up with Bethanie at the rim and grabbed her arm, then turned her face to mine. Recognition dawned in her jade-green eyes and her scream pierced my ears. I let go of her when a blinding flash of light revealed the scornful blonde beauty of Sheridan, shrieking that I’d get what I so righteously deserved! She tackled me with the strength of a man and I went sailing over the canyon’s edge into the black ravine. I hit the jagged rocks below and searing pain racked my body, then I felt the relief of nothingness. ”

“ What else happened? ”

“ When I regained consciousness, I found myself in the back of an enclosed coach with a man I didn’t recognize. He said he was bringing me back to my father’s house and I was horrified when called me by Bethanie’s name. ”

“ Desiree’, no one here suspects that you’re not Bethanie, and I hope you can keep things that way. ” I handed her the washcloth and she soaped my back. “ What did you and Marcus talk about on your carriage ride? ”

“ Valera, I don’t know if what he has up his sleeve bodes well for me or not. ” I frowned.

“ You’d best spit it out while we’re alone. ”

“ He and I are going to honeymoon onboard Goddess of the Sea, and then live in Fredericksburg, of all places. ” I sighed. “ Marcus mentioned the fact that Sheridan is at Castle Desiree’, fixing things up for our arrival. She doesn’t know that my condition has improved, though. ” I shook my head. “ That takes care of one person who had a hand in pushing me over the edge, but what’s become of Bethanie? ”

“ Desiree’, it doesn’t take a genius to figure that one out. She’d planned a midnight meeting with the love of her life, your friend, Phillipe. ”

“ That makes sense. Sheridan must have been there to see them off and then be in a position to console Marcus when Bethanie wasn’t found, but I showed up before Phillipe. ” I tried to take everything and put it in its proper perspective.

A knock sounded at my door and Valera answered it. “ Girlie, your wedding gown has arrived. ”

“ Regina, you have impeccable timing as always. Valera was just helping me to finish bathing. ” I smiled with sly amusement. What would Bethanie’s wedding gown look like? Valera handed me a huge white Egyptian cotton towel and I dried off. Regina had laid out silk pantaloons and a whalebone corset with whisper-soft satin to encase my breasts and I slipped them on.

“ Turn around, close your eyes and take a deep breath, Girlie. ” I did and Valera tightened the stays. “ Now you may see the finished product! ” The gown was heavyweight silk with horizontal markings, generously adorned with white Italian lace. The high neckline was accented with autumn gold velvet, as was the empire waist. Lavender and green floral appliqués were sewn around the flaring hemline. The fitted bodice had a faux bolero jacket embellished with the same appliqués. The sleeves were full at the top and ended at the wrist with lace ruffles. I was thinking that Bethanie did have some taste after all, but was proved wrong.

“ Bethanie, Count Marcus knew this would be to your liking when you agreed to let him have it designed for you. ”

I wanted to say, “ At least it wasn’t similar to my wedding dress. ” I gathered a pound of sincerity. “ This is an unusual perfection. ”

“ You must try it on and see if there needs to be any last minute adjustments. ” Regina and Valera helped me step into it. The measurements molded to my body and I gazed at my reflection in the mirror. Was Marcus thinking of me when he envisioned this gown? It certainly wouldn’t have suited Bethanie, but it was me on many levels. Not the young girl that Marcus had met and fallen in love with, but a woman who had managed to survive many trials and tribulations, growing into a maturity I was sure Bethanie lacked. “ You are indeed a bride that Marcus can be proud of. Now for you veil. ” I drew in my breath as I recognized the lace headdress and train that my mother had worn when she married my father. It was a perfect match to the Italian lace on the wedding gown that Marcus had made for Bethanie.

“ Girlie, when I showed this to Marcus, he knew exactly how he wanted your wedding gown to look. ” Bethanie and our mother had such a close relationship, and I couldn’t comprehend why my mother didn’t love me the same way. With no warning, I sank to the bed, drained of all emotional and physical energy. Valera and Regina removed my dress and corset so I could rest. Even though the goose-down mattress was guaranteed to keep one warm, my body was wracked with aches and pains and I shivered under the quilts, then blacked out, my unbalanced system demanding a feeding of fresh sweet blood.

“ Desiree’, the hour grows late. ” Sturdy hands forced a cup of salty-sweet liquid against my trembling lips. Valera and Gustav had saved me from a near-death situation once again.

Strength slowly returned to my body and mind, but heaviness pressed upon my heart. I felt like a lost and lonely little girl who was made to suffer through no fault of her own.

“ Valera, where did this life force come from? ”

“ From a young girl who died this afternoon; it’s the best Gustav could do without raising any alarms. ”

The door opened and Marcus strode in. He took me in his arms and held me close to his strongly beating heart, his skin alive with the scent of cinnamon and cloves. I breathed his essence into my lungs and opened my eyes to an unending view of his neck, spotting a drop of red where he must have nicked himself with hurried shaving. I touched my finger to that tiny bit of life force, and brought it to rest on my tongue; my name violently impacted

every cell in my body and reverberated throughout the room, causing me to flinch.

“ Bethanie, are you all right? ” I certainly didn’t want to be Bethanie, when his blood still circulated my name to his heart and soul.

“ Desiree’, this sham won’t last forever, but I beg you to show caution by letting Marcus retain all entitlements to his blood. ” Kermes Twa was harsh in tone and spirit. “ It’s a major sin to invade his privacy in any manner; even though he’s revealed that he still thinks of you and mourns his loss, those thoughts and feelings belong exclusively to him. You are forbidden to taste his blood again until the timing is right! Do I make myself abundantly clear on this matter? ”

“ As clear as Cinderella’s glass slipper. ” I made a vow to obey her words, but it all boiled down to the fact that my first taste of his blood was just another step in my downward spiral, an addiction in the making that I had no way of controlling.

“ Bethanie. ” Marcus lifted my chin and gazed deep into my eyes.
“ Everything will be all right, I promise you. ” He smoothed my hair and sang me a lullaby that I remembered well.

‘Sailing on a ship called Dreams
Let your life be as it seems
Tho wind and waves may swell on high
I shall keep you love, right by my side

My arms shall keep you safe and warm
My heart will shelter you from harm
You are my ocean’s precious pearl
My one and only, sweetest baby girl’

My mother had sung that song to Bethanie and me when we were tiny girls, but circumstances had changed overnight and both Bethanie and my mother shunned me as if I was a pariah. I didn’t understand then or now. Marcus kissed away tears of sorrow that overflowed down my cheeks, holding me close as I cried and gasped in earnest, not knowing what he thought of me as myself or Bethanie.

I drifted off to sleep, enfolded in his arms. The young girl’s blood raced

merrily through my veins as Bethanie, my mother and I played outside near our favorite spot in the shade of an old oak tree not far from the white-flowered apple orchard. The spring sun was bright and yellow, but soon the afternoon sky turned to clouds of black and grey as my father overshadowed us, standing with the family Bible in his outstretched hands. When he opened it to a bookmarked page my mother's face turned the same color as the low hanging clouds and her tears flowed in torrents as my father screamed horrible insults at her. He took Bethanie and my mother inside our house, and I was left alone to confront the thunder and lightning of the raging storm. Nothing was ever the same again in our home or family.

I woke up minutes past midnight, early morning of February 13th, alone again. No matter how many times I had that same dream, it always left me confused by its underlying signs and symbols. Pale moonlight flickered through the parted curtains, drawing me to the window; I saw the faint outline of a man walking away from the house and decided to find out who he was and where he was going at this howling hour. Once outside, I stayed in background silhouette, watching him make his way towards the apple orchard. A screech owl pitched his high-whistling call and the man turned his head in my direction; it was Marcus. He didn't see me, but only traveled a little further, stopping to the left of the same oak tree where Bethanie and I had played as children; the same tree that haunted my dreams. He knelt in front of a granite headstone marker and I heard him sobbing.

“ Desiree’, I’ve tried to let you go to no avail. Am I wrong in wanting to keep a part of you alive by marrying Bethanie? Although I do love her, it’s not the same as what we had and I’d give my life a million times over to have you back in my arms again. ” My heart lurched in bittersweet happiness as I knew without a doubt that Marcus still loved me, but what was I to do? In that moment of uncertainty, he got up and walked hurriedly on the path in the direction of my father’s house. I ran like the wind, fleet and sure-footed, making it to Bethanie’s room with mere seconds to spare. Marcus shook my shoulders, asking a question that I wasn’t prepared for. “ Do you truly love me with your whole being, Bethanie? ” I opened my eyes, intending to answer his question, but he put his fingertip to my lips in the way he’d done so many times before when he didn’t want a spoken answer, but to find the truth in the windows of my soul. Everything I felt for Marcus could be seen through my eyes. He held me close and sighed in long-winded relief. Anger and pleasure twined within my heart and I wondered what he’d seen in Bethanie’s eyes before she left and I came on the scene. “ I’m sorry I woke you, Bethanie. I wanted to make sure you were

feeling better before I told you the news. ”

I wasn't sure I could handle much more. With tears in my eyes, I faintly breathed his name.

“ Marcus. ”

“ Darling, I didn't mean to alarm you. Doctor Johnson and I talked this evening while you were asleep. He, your father, Regina and I all agree that the wedding will proceed, but only with close family and friends in attendance. You're still quite weak, and your energy should be saved for our ocean voyage to Fredericksburg. ”

The corners of my soul were raised into a smile that lit my lips. “ Even if the wedding party only consisted of you, me, Papa and Regina, being married to you is what I really want, Marcus. ” He kissed my forehead and rocked me back and forth. The little girl in me knew she'd found her knight in shining armor and I snuggled deep within the abounding love of his arms, falling into a calm restful sleep.

Chapter 13

“ Time to wake up, Girlie! ” Regina threw open the curtains, and I shielded my eyes from the sun's brightness. She set a breakfast tray beside my bed and handed me a glass filled to the brim with red liquid. “ Valera says you must drink this first as it contains many vitamins, herbs and nutrients to give you strength and energy for tomorrow's wedding festivities. ”

This wedding guaranteed to be different than when Marcus and I married in Fredericksburg. None of my family had been present and it would be just the opposite here. I drank Valera's concoction and tasted the young dead girl's blood which had been added to the mixture. Her life force told me she'd been laughing with joy before she died and those feelings sprung forth within my own heart and soul. This morning I'd take a refreshing walk to my grave-marker and see the inscription written there.

“ Thank you, Regina. ” I finished everything on my plate, got out of bed and gave her the biggest of hugs. “ Tomorrow can't come soon enough. ”

Regina went to Bethanie's closet and chose a non-descript dress for me to

wear. “ This will do fine, seeing as you won’t have a visitation from Count Marcus today; that would bring about a double whammy! ” I gave her a questioning look. “ Have you forgotten that this is Friday the 13th? You’d have devilish bad luck if Marcus was to catch a glimpse of you on the day before you say your wedding vows, but if he were to see you today, it would mean that Satan himself would be the guest of honor at your Holy ceremony! ”

“ And why would you say that? ” She harrumphed as I tried my best to hide the laughter escaping from my mouth. “ I’ll have you know that 13 was the number of apostles at the Last Supper when Judas betrayed Jesus. Why even Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden on a Friday. ” She wagged her finger in front of my nose for emphasis.

“ Noah’s flood started on a Friday and Christ was crucified on a Friday, so there. ” I knew Regina attended church on a regular basis, but she had a tendency to interweave Bible teachings with theories that were handed down from her mother. “ Furthermore Girlie, your bridal veil will protect you from that red rascal’s evil spirits who are jealous of matrimonial happiness. And last, but not least, your Matron of Honor will be here as a decoy to distract those who would rend your love for Marcus asunder. ” I was wise enough not to ask who’d be standing up for me, although I burned with curiosity.

Valera had schooled me well in the true worship of the Great Goddess. I remembered her words on the subject. “ The number 13 was purposely vilified by the priests of patriarchal religions because it represented femininity, of which they were afraid. Thirteen was revered in prehistoric goddess-worshipping cultures because it corresponded to the number of lunar or female menstrual cycles in a year; the sum of which was $13 \times 28 = 364$ days. ” In France she’d shown me a religious picture of an ancient holy carving, depicting Kermes Twa holding a crescent-shaped horn that bore 13 notches.

“ Friday the 13th is her holiest of days, especially set apart for women to worship and adore her in everything they see, say, and do. No men are allowed to come into contact with them on this most blessed of days. ”

“ Have you seen Valera? ” I knew that she’d gone to worship Kermes Twa and Gustav had gone to Springfield, giving each of them some time alone.

“ That I have, Bethanie. She and her man servant went to town for some last minute items, but will be back later this afternoon. ” Regina started fussing

with my wedding gown and veil, and all the accoutrements I'd have need of in the morning. "There are no men-folk near the house, so you may take a short walk in the fresh air; it'll do you good."

I was surprised she gave me permission to go outdoors, but I was pleased as a long walk to the apple orchard would clear my mind to the worship of Kermes Twa.

I took her up on her offer before it was rescinded, running downstairs towards the dining area. A woman's figure sat at the table, her back turned towards me. "Hello..."

She slowly rose. "Cousin Bethanie, how are you feeling?" It was Annelle. Pregnant, glowing and more beautiful than the last time I'd seen her. She came and gave me the biggest of hugs, and I relaxed into her arms. "I can't quite put my finger on it, but you've changed since your bridal shower." A small Cheshire cat smile played on her lips.

"Somehow you seem less tense, more in control of your emotions."

She leaned over and spoke quietly in my ear, "More like the way I remember you, Sister Desiree'."

My heart pounded within my chest. "Are your words to me supposed to bear meaning?"

She grabbed my hand, then slid the sleeve of my dress up and exposed the heart-shaped birthmark and thin-lined scar on my right wrist. "The bonded connection to my blood sister that can never be broken." She whispered as if the very walls could hear and understand the secret we shared. "Come, let's take a walk." She tucked her arm through mine and we strolled leisurely towards the orchard in February's daylight warmth till we were well away from the house and any prying ears that might catch a hint of our conversation.

"Annelle, how did you know when no one else even suspects?" She faced me directly.

"The eyes are the windows to the soul, Desiree'. Bethanie's eyes were never here with Marcus; they were always looking somewhere else for someone else, but your eyes are grounded in genuine love for him which can't be faked. The letters you wrote to me about your marriage to him is the same way I feel about Reven."

I spread my hand on her belly and felt the tiniest kicking, a small force against my palm.

“ You’ll be a wonderful mother, Annelle. And Reven; is he thrilled to know he’ll soon be a father? ”

“ Yes, Sister; he’s already proclaiming how proud a papa he is. ” Her tinkling laugh was music to my ears. “ Although he won’t be here in time to attend the wedding ceremony, you’ll be meeting and getting to know him. ”

“ How, Annelle? Marcus and I will be sailing for Fredericksburg on Sunday morning. ” A cooling breeze stirred the barren apple-tree branches.

“ Yes, Desiree’. Reven and I will be sailing back to France on the same ship as you and Marcus. It’s all been arranged; after we dock in Dunkirk, he’ll have two weeks off to see me safely to my Mother and Father’s house and will then return to his ship and finish his duties as first mate on this particular voyage. I’ll be staying in my parents’ home for the birth of our child. ”

Tears came to my eyes. Being with the two people I loved most in this world for any length of time had to be a good omen of sorts. “ You and I will be good company for each other, Sister Annelle. ”

The headstone that Marcus had knelt in front of was well-kept and the fresh bunches of lavender that had been laid were shaped into the letter ‘D’.

“ Desiree’, can you help me understand what really happened in Paris, why you let everyone assume you were dead? Why would you want to cause so much pain and heartache to those who loved you so much? ”

The question that came to my mind was one of trust and understanding; if I trusted Annelle with what I’d become, would she understand? Kermes Twa imparted the answer I gave. “ Annelle, even if I were to tell you, the story itself is incredible. If I hadn’t lived it, I’d consider it a fanciful farce. What I know for sure is that my love for Marcus kept me alive during the worst period in my life and now I have a chance to renew that love with him. In the dark recesses of his heart he still loves me in a way he could never love Bethanie. One day I hope to tell him the truth of who I am, but right now he wouldn’t accept or believe it. ”

“ Dearest Desiree’, you were the one who said that truth and honesty between blood sisters showed the highest form of love. No matter if you tell me the sky above is green and the grass below is blue, I’ll know it’s the truth. ”

Kermes Twa flowed through my veins. “ Annelle is right in saying you’re blood sisters. Put your trust in her and you’ll have a strong ally for life. ”

There was a red-marbled bench set underneath the bare-limbed majestic oak. “ You may as well sit for a while, Annelle. ” She listened intently as I told her my story. By the time I’d finished and answered her questions as best I could, cloud-shadows blotted out the sunlight and a chilly mist announced early evening. “ We must return to the house, Annelle. I do hope you’ll spend the night with me; it’ll be like old times before either of us was married. “ Happiness found a home in my heart. “ The Great Goddess has bestowed her gracious love on us, Dear Sister; your arrival means you’ll witness my marriage to Marcus. ”

“ I believe you, Desiree’. ” She held my hands in hers and gave me a serious look. “ Didn’t you know Marcus asked me to be your Matron of Honor? That’s the main reason I came today. ” I sighed and thanked Kermes Twa silently. “ Before Sheridan left, she was to be Bethanie’s Maid of Honor, but the fact of the matter was she wanted little or nothing to do with me once I sang your praises. ”

I stood in front of her and helped her rise. “ Of all the people in the world who hated me, Bethanie and Sheridan top my list, but I have those whose love is much stronger than hatred could ever be; you, your parents, Marcus, Valera and Gustav. The Great Goddess brought all of you into my life in order to fulfill my destiny. ”

We arrived at the house just as twilight descended. Regina met us at the door, a worried frown upon her face. “ I thought I’d have to send out a search party for the two of you. ”

“ That’s doubtful, Regina. The long walk we took in the fresh winter air did both of us a world of good. I don’t know about Annelle, but I’m famished. Could you send supper up to my room? ”

“ Of course, Bethanie. That way you can be assured of no men-folk nosing

around. ”

“ Regina, you’re the dearest woman; always thinking of what’s best for me in any given circumstance. ”

I hugged her tightly. “ Make sure Annelle is given whatever her heart desires as we’ll be sharing my room tonight, so we may talk of life and living. ”

“ Bethanie, it’s good that you and Annelle are friends. I had my doubts at first, but you’ve come through with flying colors. ” She kissed both of us on the cheek, and we walked upstairs to the last night I’d spend in Bethanie’s room.

Annelle was entranced, oohing and aahing as she entered Bethanie’s room for the first time. She walked around the magnificent black wrought-iron bed, lavishly decorated with three floral medallions; on a black background were flowers of blue, red, white, yellow, and pink, intertwined with tiny green leaves. The large one in the middle was flanked by a smaller one to each side. Black throw pillows delicately embroidered with Red Indian elephants accompanied the crimson bedspread of finest Egyptian cotton. A flowered needlepoint rug matched the framed emphaera hanging on the ivory-colored walls that served as artwork. The window treatments were of ivory lace, trimmed with gold-braid across the bottom. Over in the corner by the iron-plated parlor stove was a glorious claw-foot tub that had been ordered from New York City. A handsome full-length mirror was attached to the wall on the far side of the room next to the cherry-wood chest of drawers. Lace doilies lay across the top of the dresser and on each end were carved ivory elephants, their trunks in the air, holding aqua colored glass sconces. Once upon a time I’d imagined living with all the elements and furnishings in this room that I’d designed for myself, but Bethanie had told Papa she wanted it, and my father gave in to her wishes without a second thought of how it would impact my feelings.

I’d seen pictures and read many articles about French rose gardens and had based and decorated my own room in a natural setting. Like Bethanie’s room, I also had an iron-plated parlor stove and huge claw-foot tub, but that’s where the similarities ended. The walls were papered with climbing red roses and deep green leaves on a creamy white trellis which stretched across the ceiling, giving the room an appearance of a blooming rose arbor. The floor was dark polished oak, the color of freshly turned earth, and at the bedside was a periwinkle blue area rug that matched the damask window

curtains, reminding me of the sky on a clear day. They were both scattered about with silk silver stars. The midnight blue chenille bedspread sported the nine planets, the smiling sun and the man in the moon. Stained cherry-wood bookcases were lined against the walls, adjacent to the doorframe. They were five feet high and filled with my best friends; all my dolls and the hardbound books I read to them. In the corner was a mirrored cherry-wood armoire stenciled with butterflies of gold, orange, and red that held all my dresses. My large closet was a special private space that housed a small writing desk and straight-backed plain wooden chair. Late at night when I was supposed to be sleeping, I'd close the door and draw artistic designs by rose-shaped candelabra light. During my lonely days, I'd curl up on the window-seat, reading and dreaming of the minute my knight in shining armor would come rescue me.

I was lost in my memories and even thinking of stealing a few minutes worth of time to make a midnight visit to my room when a knock came at the bedroom door. "Who is it?"

"Valera and Regina with dinner for you and Annelle."

"Please come in." I opened the door to delicious smells of food. Our plates were heaped with green beans, sweet potatoes and roast beef; Annelle's was cooked through and through while mine was rare, running red with juicy blood.

Regina said, "I can only stay for a minute as there are a thousand wedding details to follow up on. You're going to make a beautiful bride, Bethanie. I'll be back in the morning to help you dress." She held my hand and kissed me goodnight, then turned to Annelle. "The beatitude of motherhood becomes you. I'm glad that you and Bethanie will be sailing on the same ship together to France because family should always be there for each other."

She left and Valera spoke up. "May I have a minute alone with you, Bethanie?"

"Valera, whatever you wish to tell me can be said right here in front of Annelle; she knows everything."

"That pleases me, Desiree'. I won't be able to accompany you on your trip

as first planned, but the Great Goddess has supplied our needs. Annelle can keep an eye on you and Gustav will put your essential items in with Annelle's baggage, along with specific instructions. ”

“ Valera, you, Cecelia, and Gustav are much more than servants; you are my dear friends. ” I hugged her tightly. “ Seeing as you nursed me back to health, Marcus has agreed to your offer of continued service. When should I expect you at Castle Desiree’? ”

“ One week after your arrival. That's when you'll need a fresh supply of blood and herbs to keep you healthy. ” She smiled. “ You both have been extremely blessed by Kermes Twa. ” Valera laid her hand on Annelle's pregnant belly. “ This baby you carry is more precious than silver or gold, bringing untold riches to future generations. ” She held my hands, looking me directly in the eye. “ This is where I say my real good-bye until we meet again at Castle Desiree’. I'll see you married, but you'll be more than busy with guests and your husband. Gustav and I must travel to New York and close the house; that all takes time. ”

“ Valera, I love you. ”

“ And I, you, Desiree’. ” She left me alone with Annelle.

As we ate, Annelle told me about her wedding and how much she loved being married to her husband, Reven. “ Sister, the fact that I'm to have this baby is a miracle. So many doctors told me it would be impossible, but I knew they were wrong. ” She was a lovely vision that I envied. By the time we finished eating and sponge bathing, the hour was late. We climbed into the goose-down mattress, giggling and gossiping like old times, until our eyes grew heavy with sleep.

I opened my eyes to weak winter light filtering through the gauzy curtains. After Friday's springtime warmth and the overnight rains, the weather had turned bitterly cold.

Annelle was already up and about. “ Sister Desiree’, morning has arrived in fine fashion. ” I stretched and yawned; she extended her hands and helped me rise, then we wandered to the window and stared directly into the face of a violet-green swallow. I immediately thought of the colored appliques on my wedding gown. “ This is a perfect omen! ” I raised my eyebrows in question. “ Purple is receptive and spiritual in its color energy, symbolizing

the ambition of your will power. It's the Seventh Power of the Rainbow and has long been associated with the mysticism and purification of healing and peace and is worn to contact higher forces. "Annelle's jade eyes connected her spirit with mine.

"Green is the color of nature, fertility and life and has often been linked to the prosperity of your money and luck. It's the Fourth Power of the Rainbow, symbolizing the healthy grounding elements of luxuriant growth and conception. Coupled with the color energy of red in the sacraments of religious and magical practices, it's the true balance of the Great Goddess Kermes Twa."

"Annelle, you've spoken as a true believer."

"Sister, it's good to see happiness upon your face once again." She rubbed my back. "I'm surprised we haven't been inundated with Regina, Valera, and your father as of yet."

I laughed. "I'm sure Dr. Johnson gave them specific instructions to let both of us rest as long as possible. Today will be stressful and tomorrow as well." Our wedding ceremony was to take place at 3 pm and then we'd spend our honeymoon in rooms Marcus had prepared at The Bethanie Inn. "Your condition is delicate to say the least and mine; well, I live my life according to the wishes of Kermes Twa, one day at a time." There was a knocking at the door. "Who is it?"

"Regina and Valera."

"Please come in." They brought a light breakfast consisting of biscuits smothered in butter and honey and coffee for me and milk for Annelle. "I hope the both of you are well rested. Even though this is a day filled with promised joy and celebration, it will be a long one." Regina beamed. "I can't believe how empty this house will be without you in it, Bethanie." She hugged me tightly as tears spilled down her cheeks.

"It won't be forever, Regina. Marcus and I will be returning within 6 months, living in the house that's being built for us on top of Mount Salem." She sniffled into her handkerchief and began to smile at that thought. "We'll be able to visit each other quite often."

I paid scant attention to the glass of bright red liquid Valera handed to me. I

felt the young girl's blood rush through my veins and saw a startling vision through 16 year old Bethanie's eyes. In her hands was the Bible my father had hidden from view when we were 10 and her smile was malicious in unholy triumph at what was revealed in our family tree. I gazed at my mother's handwriting, trying to comprehend the truth. Bethanie and I had different fathers! I wanted to close my eyes against the pain and heartache, but Kermes Twa hit me with a sudden gripping force. The Great Goddess swirled in strong explanation currents, giving rise to unanswered questions when I saw the name of the man who'd given me life. I wondered about the man I'd known as Uncle Joshua all my life; did he have the slightest inkling that I was his second daughter?

At last I understood why I was rejected and hated with a vengeance by my family; my mother, because she'd been found out, my father, because I wasn't related to him by blood, and finally, my half sister, Bethanie, because she perceived me to be a major intrusion upon her territory. Anger flowed like a raging river in my veins. "Desiree', focus all your emotions on Marcus today." Kermes Twa was right. I slipped the engagement ring from Marcus onto my right hand, glancing at the rose organza rubies that surrounded a pearl of purest white.

"Quit your daydreaming, Girlie. All your hopes and wishes will come true when the preacher pronounces you and Marcus as husband and wife." Regina looked out the window in the direction of Mount Salem.

Valera had brought Annelle's bridesmaid dress to Bethanie's room. The heavyweight lavender silk was done with an overlay of pale ivory Italian lace, a perfect accompaniment to compliment Annelle's coloring and my own wedding gown. The neckline was gently scooped, accented with cream colored velvet, as was the empire waist. The sleeves were form fitted; deep gold and green floral appliqués were sewn around the flaring hemline.

When Regina molded me into Bethanie's wedding gown, my mind screamed for the truth to come out, letting the chips fall where they may, but I knew I'd doom myself in the process. Keeping up with false pretenses made my heart weep tears I couldn't shed, so I took a deep breath to calm myself. Marcus and I would be together and that was all that counted. The mirror showed a stunning reflection of my outward form; I smiled my best Bethanie smile, content with the thought I was nothing like her, although a little sniggling in the back of my mind said otherwise. "Bethanie, you remind me

so much of your sainted Mother on her wedding day. ” Regina felt that statement would make me happy, but my mother wasn’t a saint by any means.

A tapping sounded at the door and Regina moved swiftly to open it. Papa walked over to Annelle and hugged her closely, then gave her the lavender and baby’s breath bouquet she’d carry on the way to the altar. “ Niece, you’re a beautiful matron of honor. ”

Regina smiled and said she wanted my father to close his eyes for a moment. She placed my mother’s lace headdress with its attached floor-length train on my head, making a few minor adjustments. I stood before him and he drew in his breath. “ Bethanie, you remind me so much of your mother. I loved her as much as I love you. ”

“ I love you too, Papa. ” I wondered if my meaningless words sounded as hollow as they made me feel. He handed me the flowers I’d hold as I spoke my wedding vows with Marcus. Baby’s breath and lavender, interspersed with white gold-tinged prize roses that I recognized from the gardens in Fredericksburg.

“ The roses are a special gift from Marcus; he had them imported and has been growing them here in America just for this most blessed occasion. ” Papa held out his arm to me. “ Shall we? ” Annelle walked in front of us, then down the stairs to the parlor, where I would wed Marcus.

The gathering of guests was small; some of Papa’s retired captains and their wives, along with Gustav, Valera, and Regina. Annelle walked to the altar and stood across from Marcus and Doctor Johnson, who served as best man.

Papa held my arm until we faced Reverend Howard. Marcus took his place at my side and gathered my hands in his. He was a breathtaking vision in his black waist-coat; the buttons were cloth covered, embroidered with small flowers which matched the lavender and green floral appliqués sewn on the bottom hem of my wedding gown.

Reverend Howard began the ceremony. “ We’ve come to join together Marcus and Bethanie in the holy and sacred bonds of a loving marriage relationship. I would impart to them wisdom that’s been passed down through the ages by those souls who’ve lived as couples before, knowing that two hearts are truly stronger than one. Life is a continuous cycle; a

circle which never ends, but intersects through the good times and the hard times, the thick and thin years, the tribulations and triumphs. Although there's no way to infuse all that's been learned, hopefully as hours and days and years pass, love and fidelity will strengthen and bond, ensuring the marriage vows will last until death parts them. ” He smiled benignly.

“ The law of God is love. To live a life without love is to merely exist, to be one of the living dead for whom there is no redemption. Before one gives his or her life to the vows of marriage, one must know his heart; his true feelings and thoughts about the one he wishes to take as a life partner.

Marcus and Bethanie both understand and have agreed with loving minds that it is their wish to be married on this day. ” He turned to Marcus. “ Do you, Count Marcus of Fredericksburg, take to wife, Bethanie Terrance of Springfield? To love, honor, and cherish throughout your life together with her? ”

Marcus said, “ I do, ” as he gazed into my eyes. I was more than stunned as he slipped the wedding ring on my 3rd finger. It was the ring my father had given to my mother on the day they married. The stone was a Tourmaline; medium green with purple marbling cut into the shape of a rosette, which matched the embroidered flowers on my gown and his waistcoat.

Reverend Howard spoke to me with the voice of Kermes Twa. “ Do you, Desiree' Terrance take to husband, now and forever, Count Marcus of Fredericksburg; to love, honor, and cherish, till death parts you from him? ”

I said with all sincerity and honesty in that one instant, “ Always and forever; from this moment on, I'll be the one love of your life, constant and true. ” My eyes brimmed over with tears of joy and happiness to be with Marcus again. I didn't care what the circumstances were, or how I was pretending to be my sister; nothing mattered except for the love I had in my heart for him.

Reverend Howard boomed, “ I now pronounce you husband and wife. Count Marcus, you may kiss your bride. ”

Marcus lifted my veil and kissed me full on my lips, sealing our vows of marriage, then he leaned over and whispered in my ear, “ I hope the ring is to your liking, because I love you as much as your father loved your mother. ”

There were no words I could say that would explain my feelings of anger or love without causing a ruckus, so I fought for control of my emotions. “ I love you more than my own life, Marcus. You’ve made me the happiest woman on the face of the earth today. ” I put my arms around his neck and opened my mouth to him, needing to taste the warmth and sweetness of his breath, mingling with my own soul. His kiss lasted for a second that stretched into eternity, and was enough to calm my ruffled feathers.

“ Would you care to dance, my Beautiful Bride? ” Marcus led me to the ballroom, where a string quartet was tuning violins and cellos. They began to play Bethanie’s favorite waltz, ‘Valse Romantique’ by Claude Debussy.

I said a silent prayer to Kermes Twa, asking for strength to see this charade all the way through without an eruption taking place. “ Desiree’, act your part or get offstage! ”

Marcus removed his waistcoat, showing his cream colored vest. It was close-fitted at the top and slightly flared at the bottom. Two small pockets decorated the front of the vest and they were carefully embroidered with the same floral design of lavender and green that adorned his waistcoat buttons. A very tiny gold-tone trim accented his pockets, front closure, neckline and hemline. We were a matching pair of bookends, with nothing to separate us in the here and now. We waltzed in fluid movement until I was breathless with happiness. The music stopped and Gustav was immediately at our side with glasses of red liquid. I was sure my glass held heavy duty blood to see me through the night. “ I wish to propose a toast to the most beautiful woman, the most beautiful bride, the most beautiful wife a man has ever had the pleasure of marrying. Bethanie, I give all that I am to you; heart, soul, and blood. ”

We clinked glasses and drank to the last drop. The remainder of the young girl’s blood raced merrily through my veins, pooling in my heart and soul, while my mother’s headdress and ring allowed me access to significant mental images and impressions. My mother had fallen in love with Joshua on the very day they’d met. Their love was as high as the Swiss Alps and as deep as the Pacific Ocean. They had three weeks to steal many moments alone, professing their love both spiritually and physically, neither knowing or suspecting that my grandparents had already arranged legally binding marriages for both my mother and her twin sister, my Aunt Madeliane; my mother to Bethanie’s father and my aunt to Joshua. Annelle was born 9

months after Joshua and Madeliane were married, but his love for my mother never waned. Fated circumstances threw them together two years later when they were both feeling alone and lonely; one thing led to another and I was conceived out of the love that my mother and Joshua had for each other, while Bethanie was produced by my mother's wifely duty to her husband. 'What twisted lives we lead, when first we practice to deceive.' Deception seemed to be the name of the game for all of us in Life's Grand Play. The only deception I wasn't practicing was the fact that I truly loved Marcus.

Marcus bowed low in front of me, then proffered his hand as the string quartet began playing Papa's favorite waltz, 'The Blue Danube.' Our hearts and souls danced to the sweet trilling notes and I followed his lead, not allowing myself the disquiet of negative emotions while his arms encircled me and his blood circulated my name. The final strains came to an end and Regina rang a small silver bell. "Count Marcus, your special wedding supper is ready to be served." Shortly after the meal was finished, Papa's groomsman would drive us to the Bethanie Inn where we would consummate our marriage.

A dismaying thought had taken root in my mind. "When the time came, how would I explain no blood when Marcus took Bethanie's virginity?" I discussed my valid concerns with Valera, hoping she could supply an answer.

She calmed my myriad fears. "Desiree', you must have faith in Kermes Twa, who exists in close proximity to Mother Nature. I've taken care of your body's need to relieve itself of virgin's blood, adding Barberry and Thuja, The Tree Of Life, to the young girl's life force which you ingested." She handed me a brandy-glass filled with clear lily-scented liquid. "This Purple Pasque Flower wine will stimulate and relax the inner muscles of your uterus, bringing about a small amount of blooded weeping." Valera patted the seat next to her on the couch and I smiled in anticipation of a story to accompany the drink. "In Greek mythology, this windflower is said to have sprouted from Aphrodite's tears of happiness. She was the goddess of chastity in women, the bringer of good fortune and victory; a nature goddess associated with the arrival of spring. She was the goddess of spiritual love and physical attraction, bringing joy to gods and humans alike." I sipped the wine and she continued.

"Even though Aphrodite had many wonderful qualities, her jealous nature

and temper brought about the negative balance which is always part and parcel of life and living, even for gods and goddesses. She bore a son named Eros and he took to wife a human named Psyche. Now Aphrodite and Psyche's two sisters tried their best to ruin the marriage union between husband and wife: Aphrodite because she believed no one was good enough for her son, and the two sisters who believed their lives paled in comparison to what Psyche had with Eros. They infused her mind with doubts about his physical form, which Psyche had never seen; they said he must be a hideous monster. ”

“ Valera, a person's outward appearance doesn't necessarily reveal what's on the inside. ”

“ That's very true, Desiree'. One night while Eros slept, Psyche took it upon herself to satisfy everyone's curiosity. In the midnight hour she lit a candle and went to his room. When she spied the angelic figure of Eros for the first time, her love for him intensified to the point where she became careless. Psyche held the flickering light above his godlike body and he awoke when fat drops of beeswax burned his naked skin. In his anger at being disobeyed he flew back home to his mother, the goddess Aphrodite. She told him that he would be better off without Psyche and that he should make his home with the gods, not on Earth with mere mortals. Eros might have left it at that, but Psyche begged her mother-in-law to give her a chance at redemption. Aphrodite conceded after telling Psyche how ugly she was. ” Valera placed her hands on her breast and sighed. “ She said that Psyche must pass four differing trials put forth. The first three were so simple: Psyche had to sort a huge mount of barley, millet, poppy seeds, lentils, and beans, then she needed to gather a hank of wool from a flock of shining golden sheep. Thirdly she had to fill a crystal vessel with water from the spring that fed the Styx and Cocytus Rivers. The last trial was certainly not the least. Aphrodite made mention that Persephone, wife of Hades, the God of the Underworld, had within her possession a jar of beauty cream that she wanted to use on herself. Psyche was up to the challenge, but the temptation to make herself more beautiful proved to be too much. She reasoned that if the comely perfection of Aphrodite needed enhancing, it would be bound to help an imperfect human such as she perceived herself to be. When Psyche brought the jar back to her own bedroom and removed the lid, the fumes overcame her and like Sleeping Beauty, she immediately fell into a deathlike sleep. Eros found her and in his grief he brought Psyche to live at Mount Olympus, where the gods resided. Aphrodite was still reticent to end the

conflict with Psyche, but gave in with tears of joy when she learned her pregnant daughter-in-law was to give birth to a grandchild that Aphrodite could put her full emphasis on; the name of the child was Pleasure. ”

Valera slipped me a vial of red powder. “ Mix this red anthurium into Marcus’s glass when he toasts you in private; it’s a male sexuality essence guaranteed to enhance what he feels physically, creating within the core of his emotions the single minded effect of letting nothing disrupt the pleasure he’ll give to his virgin bride. ” She gripped my hands within hers. “ Marcus has projected all his dormant memories of you onto Bethanie and the timing must be right before you are allowed to waken them. Desiree’, heed my astute advice; don’t tempt Marcus with the taste of your blood in any way, shape or form or you run the risk of having the slumbering giant’s wrath within his heart and soul reign down on you in a maelstrom of fire and brimstone! He’ll know you’re not Bethanie, and won’t forgive your deceit and dishonesty. ”

My mind was brought back to the present as Marcus helped settle me into my chair and Papa did the same for Annelle. Papa was seated at the head of the dining room table, while proper etiquette dictated that Marcus and I sit across from each other. It was small recompense to have Annelle seated to my left when I wanted Marcus to have that position. “ In honor of my new son-in-law, this wedding feast contains his favorite foods. ” Everyone clapped as the waiters brought in heaping platters of antipasto, which included cold meats; prosciutto, ham, and hard salamis. Other platters contained Provolone and mozzarella cheeses, marinated vegetables, Roman Style Artichokes and roasted red peppers. There was crusty Italian bread, warm from the oven and stracciatella, a soup made with chicken broth, eggs and cheese. Pollo alla Cacciatora con Funghi, a dish of Chicken Cacciatore with Mushrooms and a salad made with crisp torn lettuce, dressed with three parts olive oil to one part balsamic vinegar, blended with crushed garlic cloves, salt, pepper, and Italian dried herbs. Desserts consisted of Torta di Ricotta Italian Cheesecake and Ciambelline Dolci con la Glassa; Sweet Cookie Rings with Lemon Frosting that symbolized the eternal binding love of the circled golden wedding bands that newly married couples wore.

Marcus stood and tapped on his empty glass. “ For this esteemed occasion, I have an unusual surprise for my most adored wife. ” With that statement, the head waiter brought in a clear bottle filled with bubbling pink liquid. “ As a tribute to my bride, I’m presenting her with the first glass of Bethanie Blush.

A white grape wine with an underlying hint of autumn apples that's been years in the making; light, sweet and sparkling. " He gave a quick nod and I drank it slowly, savoring the unique flavor on my tongue. It did bring about visions of Bethanie in all her frilly femininity. The wine was poured and served to Papa, Annelle, and the other guests who made toasts, complimenting the bridal couple and the Bethanie Blush. We ate, drank and made merry, until the hour grew late. " Bethanie Darling, we must take our leave. The rest of the night is for us, and the morrow for sailing to Fredericksburg. "

Marcus retrieved my hooded cloak and fur-lined gloves, as the weather had turned bitterly cold. Annelle was to accompany us to the Bethanie Inn, meeting her husband Reven, in the morning; the four of us would board Goddess of the Sea and make port in Dunkirk, France, around March 1st, 1877. I kissed Papa and Regina good-bye, knowing that I'd see them again when the house on Mount Salem was completed. " Bethanie, remember the discussion we had on the night you and Marcus became engaged? It would make me very happy to know that you were in the same motherly way as Annelle. "

" Yes, Papa; that would be a dream come true. " But if I were to have children, they would no more be his flesh and blood than I was.

" Girlie, t'is sorrowful to have you leaving us, but what great joy there'll be in my heart when you and Count Marcus return and live in Springfield. " She hugged me tight and I knew I'd be missing her, also.

" Regina, I want you to plan the biggest coming home party this town has ever seen. " I needed to keep what I said simple and to the point. " I love you, " I whispered as I turned to leave.

Marcus shook Papa's hand and kissed Regina on the cheek. " We'll return before the winter storms set in. " He thought for a moment. " The celebration of our homecoming will be a 20th birthday present for Bethanie. "

Annelle, Marcus and I walked to Papa's enclosed carriage and got in. Annelle yawned and her eyes drooped; Marcus smiled and nodded his head and I moved over to where Annelle sat.

" Cousin, lay your head on my lap. " She did and was soon fast asleep.

“ You two make a beautiful picture of femininity; almost as if you were sisters who had grown up in comfortable togetherness. ” Marcus leaned across and took my hands in his, removed my dark green gloves and kissed each of my fingers in turn.

“ Mmmm. ” There was a purr in his throat and a gleam in his eyes.

The groomsman drove at a fast clip all the way into Springfield. I felt the carriage come to a sudden halt and the door was opened by a handsome man with brown curly hair and deep blue eyes. He gently shook Annelle’s shoulder and she woke up, threw her arms around his neck and giggled like a schoolgirl, then kissed him full on his mouth. “ Reven, I’m so glad you arrived this evening; now my night won’t be lonely at all. ”

She extended her hand and he helped her down, grabbed her by the waist and swung her around until she was breathless. “ How is my most beautiful wife and baby to be? ”

Happiness burst forth from within my heart and spread to my face when I saw my cousin, my sister so loved by her husband. I could only hope for the same from Marcus. “ Bethanie, how you remind me of your sister...” I barely heard the words escape from his lips. He climbed out of the carriage and my heart raced in anticipation of how we’d spend the rest of the night.

“ Bethanie? ”

Marcus and I stood side by side as Annelle introduced us to her husband, Reven Aleanse. “ Darling, this is my cousin, Bethanie and her husband, Count Marcus of Fredericksburg. ”

He smiled and his voice was warm, but I could see the faraway seaman’s glint in his eyes that reminded me of Phillipe and my unloving sister.

“ Bethanie. ” He kissed the back of my ungloved hand.

“ Marcus. ” They gave each other a hardy handshake. “ It’s my pleasure to finally be introduced to both of you. We’ll take our leave, and meet you at mid-morning to travel to the ship. ” He winked in our direction. “ I know that you wish to have some private time, just as Annelle and I do. ”

I kissed Annelle’s cheek and whispered so that only she could hear, “ Sleep well, Sister. ” She and Reven walked up the steps and we followed closely behind on our way to the Honeymoon suite.

Chapter 14

Marcus opened the door and carried me over the threshold. Regina was superstitious by nature and had informed me that this was in order to stop the bride from tripping, thus bringing a perilous start to the marriage. The fireplace crackled warm with flames as the smell of a thousand lavender petals enveloped us. Across the back wall candelabra-light flickered on two marble statues, one male and one female. They stood in front of a huge porcelain claw foot tub, guarding each end. An arched trellis bedecked in green ivy and lavender was set above the tub, connecting the statues. Marcus set me down and gently kissed my lips, then released me to gather glasses and a bottle of pink champagne. “ Before we go any further, I want to propose a toast to my beautiful bride, my loving wife. ” He raised his glass. “ To you, Bethanie; may our love last forever and a day. ” He poured the bubbly and we drank to the last drop.

“ It’s my turn to pour and offer a toast to you, my beloved husband. ” Marcus turned his back for a moment and I slipped the anthurium into his fluted glass. I tapped his shoulder, then entwined his arm with mine. “ Yours is the love I’ve waited for all my life; may the gods of heaven and the demons of hell never restrict or separate us from each other. ” We drank again and I knew that my pleasure would soon begin.

Marcus was always inventive with his lovemaking and this night proved to be a fine example. He placed the glasses on a long table and helped me remove my cape and hat. I only knew how to be a woman of strong desires, not accustomed to the simpering moods of a frightened virgin. I opened my mouth and his graceful tongue swirled around in tango-steps of cinnamon and clove. He pulled me near to his beating heart; seconds flew by as eternity slowed to a standstill in the strength of his manly desire. His moistened lips lightly glided to the skin of my neck. I wanted Marcus to taste the heat of my emotions racing through his veins, but his fingers deftly unbuttoned Bethanie’s wedding gown. He pushed the sleeves down past my shoulders and reigned warm seductive kisses on them. I shivered as his practiced fingertips skimmed my back, flitting like butterflies along my spine.

“ Bethanie, you and I belong together...” His voice trailed off, and he

clapped his hands. A small entourage of serving ladies appeared in pure white tunics; unspeakable dread pooled inside my soul, rippling into unsettling thoughts as I remembered the horror of bloodthirsty events which had occurred in the king's evil court.

“ Desiree’, you have nothing to fear from Marcus; relax and let this loving adventure bond you closer to him. ” The Great Goddess left as quickly as she came.

One of the ladies began to talk and I listened closely. “ Many statues and frescos in ancient Pompeian gardens show Venus, the goddess of love in translucent silk, which your husband has chosen for you to wear. ” She slipped the rest of Bethanie’s gown from my shoulders and I was left standing in my undergarments. I took to heart what Kermes Twa had said as my corset and pantaloons were quickly removed and replaced with a medium violet knee-length piece of cloth. “ This tunica was adapted from the Greek chiton and the stolla is placed over it. ” The same translucent cloth in medium green was full length from neck to ankle, high-waisted and fastened at the shoulders with gold and tourmoline clasps. My hair was loosened, then pinned back with two ornate pearl and tourmaline combs. She led me to the mirror and I saw myself adorned as the female statue.

“ Your husband wished for me to remind you of Mars; the god of war was one of the most worshipped gods in the Roman military. In his honor, warlords wore crested helmets, carried festooned lances and bore sacred Ancile shields. The long, rectangular strips of material forming their skirts were called pteruges and they were exclusively reserved for senior officers. They led their armies into battle while shouting ‘Mars vigilia!’ , which meant ‘Mars awaken!’ These actions and words were intended to make Mars awake and lead them to victory. ” I knew in my heart that Marcus was already the victor when it came to me. She continued. “ The month of March was named after Mars, and the name of your husband is derived from Mars. ” Marcus was born on March 28th; this was important to him because he identified himself with Mars!

As if on cue, the door opened and the serving ladies left. I was delighted by the spectre of my husband dressed in full battle regalia as the warrior-god Mars, ready to claim his lover, Venus. I laughed and shouted my bravissimos, then prostrated myself in front of him. He gathered my hands in his, and I emerged as...

“ Venus Rising, perfected goddess of love and light
Born from the union of green-foamed sea and day-blue sky
Your beauty rivals that of the noonday sun,
the midnight moon, and the starlit night
I celebrate my marriage rites with you, my fair delight
In the fertility of burgeoning spring
for you are indeed my Venus,
my goddess of love supreme ”

As I rose, he knelt on bended knee.

“ Her one true love on earth was Mars, the Roman god of war
Born of the mother goddess Juno,
Guardian and Protectress of all women, be they rich or be they poor
Sprung from the mighty loins of Jupiter,
the ruling god of purple passion
Who imparted wisdom, justice and final victory in his fashion
Twicely linked to him in name and birth month honor
Bearing my torch of virtued love,
I am your shining knight in silver-couraged armor. ”

Marcus kissed the back of my hand. “ Bethanie, as I live and breathe, no other woman will ever take your place in my heart. ” He stood, clapped his hands a second time and servants filled the tub with steaming water, spiraling tendrils of lavender pervading the air. “ Did you know that Mars employed this very scent to woo and win the love of his life, Venus? ” He helped me step into the peace and tranquility of the fragrant water and removed his golden helmet, using it as a dipper to drench my body. Marcus drew in his breath as lavender petals clung to the silken material that hugged me like a second skin. “ My spear of love will thrust its way into your heart and soul and not even The Shield of Mars could prevent that. ” He removed the combs from my hair, letting it fall in waves as he viewed my near nakedness. “ Never hide the beauty of yourself from me. ” I opened the windows of my soul to him and yet he couldn’t see who I really was, blinded by his vision of Bethanie as Venus. He didn’t realize that she was miles away and I had no qualms about taking every last ounce of the love he offered. I held my arms out to him and he lifted me, then I felt the heat of the fireplace.

“ Your hair is blacker than raven’s feathers. ” He ran his fingers through my flowing tresses. “ Your eyes, the emeralds that adorn your face. ” He gazed for just a moment. “ Your lips are redder than ripe cherries. ” He kissed them and his tongue traced their outline. “ Their taste is sweeter than honey from the bumblebees. ” He unfastened the gold and tourmoline shoulder clasps and the stolla slipped to my ankles. His hands framed themselves around my slender neck and I was sure I would swoon. “ White and graceful as a swan. ” I willed him to taste the essence of my heartbeat, my veins throbbing in anticipation as he licked and stroked, then sucked; he suddenly stopped and gauged the reaction of my feelings. His smile was devilish and playful. “ Look to the flames burning before you; they pale in comparison to the desire you’ve aroused in me! ” He uncorked a bottle of champagne and poured it into a silver chalice. He added crushed cherries and light brown sugar to the liquid until it was the texture of congealed blood. “ I’m the artist and you, my dear, are my canvas of tasty love. ” He removed the violet tunica in a fluid motion, peeling it from my shoulders, over my breasts and legs, then to my ankles until I stood in all my naked glory before his eyes. He lowered his brush into the red mixture and with a critical eye dabbed the sticky paint on my breasts and the nexus of my womanhood, a cherried champagne bloodbath in the making.

“ As the god of war, it’s my solemn duty to cover your female parts with my blood; to claim you as my deeded property and protect you from any others who’d invade my territory. ” Did he suspect in his deepest heart of hearts that I was Desiree’?

I parted my lips, intending to shout that I was already his in every way, but he pressed his index finger against my mouth. “ You’re not allowed to speak, but must listen to what your body feels; you know the spiritual aspects of love, but now I’ll teach you the physical lessons, a succulent dessert that I’ll bring to fruition. ”

He molded his hands to the small of my back and I placed my hands over his pumping heart, feeling his strength, his resolve, his underlying purpose to make Bethanie his wife in every way.

“ Marcus, I’m your willing student, awaiting your skilled instructions. ”

The perception of my ears and heart deceived me as the words fell from his lips. “ My love for you is always and forever and forever in all ways, Desiree’. ” Marcus began his husbandly feast at my bodied table. His hands

held my face in a vice grip as if I'd slip away given half a chance. He licked me from my forehead to the tip of my chin, tasting to see if my desire matched his own. He tilted my head back, languidly focused, then locked his eyes to mine and murmured, " Yes, only you, Desiree'. Your love is to die for. "

I softly strummed his stubble-roughened cheeks with my fingertips, then carved the outline of his warm masculine lips. The darkness of his hair glistened in the firelight as I slowly ran my hands through his curls. He barely breathed, coiled into position, then swift as a rattlesnake his hands and mouth took on a feverish life of their own; touching, feeling, and stroking my pliant body. With striking precision he assaulted my mouth and lips, searching for the heated truth of my love. I drew him into my cavern of sweet nectar and his tongue circled my world, his sharp teeth biting and nipping, savoring the full flavor of me. His hands caressed my back and hips in kneaded needing, a yearning to take me as his rightful possession.

Marcus took his cue from the way I sighed his name, the sound reverberating in my every cell. His unbridled passion hit like a tidal wave; not a hint of fair-weather breezes for his virgin bride, his love centered on the fact that I was Desiree' of towering wants and needs that must be met and satisfied. He was a man of gun-powder gusto and lusty life; my mouth trembled with long-forgotten, but familiar sensations as our tongues danced a cinnamon clove waltz of love. I gave no thoughts to what Bethanie might do if she were in my place, but did what I'd always done in the presence of my beloved Marcus; I felt no shame in helping him remove his warrior regalia. I couldn't control my actions when his naked chest came into view. His smooth muscles rippled and his brownish red nipples hardened underneath the suckling pressure of my mouth and tongue. Bending Mars, the god of raging war, to my own will and actions was my primary objective, but when Marcus moaned in pure sensation, I was the one who became weak in the knees. " I'm Venus, your goddess of love; my duty is the ultimate goal and great reward of your pleasure. "

The bed was strewn with more lavender petals and he lay facedown on them. I trailed kisses from the broadness of his shoulders to the small of his back, causing goose bumps to rise to the surface of his skin. The taste and smell of him would always linger in the landscape of my mind. The pulse point on his neck bulged and my overloaded senses reeled, racing gleefully in

currents of red. I put my mouth on his jugular vein, ignoring the alarm signals and danger warnings that went off in my brain. “ Marcus, I’m so hungry and you’re the only one who can satisfy the craving I have deep inside. ” Just as my fangs started to resolve that problem, Marcus rolled over on top of my body, his neck out of reach. I decided to take a different approach to the matter at hand and I slid each of his fingers in and out of my mouth in anticipation of a greater prize. “ Mars vigilia! ” He rose and I knelt in front of him, worshipping at the Temple of Mars, knowing I’d be the victor in this round of warfare. I fed my insatiable need, gliding up and down on his rock hard shaft as he sighed his every want and desire in guttural sounds. I licked and nibbled, watching his spear of love grow harder and harder, then took the tip of his manhood in-between my teeth and gently scraped along the top and sides until he gasped in complete surrender, the manly seed of his life force finally released into my warm and willing mouth.

I swallowed, realizing it wasn’t a substitute for his blood, but just as potent and effective. “ You have nothing left to prove, Desiree’; let me love you like there’s no tomorrow. ” Marcus planted kisses in the hollow of my throat, pinpointing the pulse spots on my neck. He nibbled and sucked at leisure, then built a full head of steam into a bulldozing locomotive. His coal hot hands and burning fingers tracked steel rims around my breasts, from their valleyed bases to their mountaintops, followed by his conductor’s tongue; teasing and massaging, pulling and tugging on my twin peaks until they were hard and erect like arrow tips. His lips maintained their side-to-side velocity as his teeth grazed my nipples, sending red hot molten lava coursing through my veins.

“ Marcus. ” His very name was love. He was a fire-breathing dragon, igniting scorching flames of magical desire on the skin of my belly. Arching shivers surged to my nerve endings, consuming me with the fire of Dante’s Inferno. He moved his hands to my thighs and I offered a willing invitation of no resistance. This is where I wanted Marcus to be. I could no longer speak in coherent terms so I whimpered out my cravings as his slender fingers slowly maneuvered their way in and out of my body; touching, gliding and feeling my femininity engorge with blood. Like cream rising to the top of the milk, my complete gratification rose from the very core of my being, sending wave after wave of ecstasy crashing over me. My body jerked and spasmed, but it wasn’t enough. I wanted our bodies to become

one flesh, one spirit, one heart. Marcus read the untamed thoughts of my body language and his hands and mouth devoured me like a savage beast. In a harsh frenzy of emotion and carnal desire he staked his husband's claim as my master, roughly grabbing my legs and forcing them far apart, gazing hard on the vulnerability of my nakedness. His teeth were barred, his countenance that of an insane madman as he plunged hard and deep into the quivering sex of my body. I screamed in total surrender, and then exploded into a million sparkling fireflies as his liquid maleness filled up the emptiness that had lived in my soul for a lifetime.

Marcus was contrite as his breathing slowed and his eyes unglazed. " Did I hurt you too much, Bethanie? " He gently touched my legs where they ran red with blood, then lost control over his actions as an unknown entity guided his mouth to my inner thighs and womanhood. I never in that one moment considered the fact he was drinking my blood, drinking my life force, drinking my tainted impurity. When he was through, not a speck of blood remained.

I slept soundly through the night, sated with both the physical and emotional bonds that I had forged within the loving arms of my own true husband, Marcus. I awoke as he snuggled closer to me, embracing the perfume of my hair and body.

" Bethanie, my most beloved wife, I thought I had dreamed you into existence, but it makes my heart glad to know that you are indeed a most lovable reality. " His fingers traced the outline of my neck, feeling the tainted pumping of my blood. " How I wish we could stay like this forever, my Darling. " He disentangled himself from the covering bed sheets and wrapped his nakedness in a burgundy robe, then jangled a silver servant's bell. " I'll have hot water sent for you to privately bathe in, Bethanie. " He winked and a smile of mischief played on his lips. " If we were to step into the tub together, we'd definitely miss the boat to Fredericksburg! " He headed towards the door, then turned around and blew me a kiss.

He went to his rooms to wash and dress in his traveling clothes, while

I was expected to do the same. All of Bethanie's clothing had been packed for the sea journey except for the dark green and red striped gown that the Great Goddess herself had presented to me; that was the dress I'd be wearing on our voyage. As soon as we arrived at Castle Desiree', I'd have the finest seamstresses design a whole new wardrobe for me in colors and materials that suited my personality.

I was cleaned and attired with the help of a serving lady, having mere seconds to spare before Marcus returned to collect me. We headed downstairs to meet Annelle and Reven for a quick breakfast of biscuits, honeyed butter and strong coffee. Annelle's pregnancy radiated throughout the dining room, and I basked in her soon-to-be motherly glow. I hugged her tightly to my breast and whispered, "Annelle, you are the most beautiful woman that the Great Goddess has graced this earth with."

Marcus slapped Reven on the back like they had known each other since boyhood. "Our wives add a much needed touch of elegance to this setting and I believe that both of us have been more than blessed in our marriages."

They talked of business matters, and sailing aboard Goddess of the Sea, while Annelle and I discussed baby names. The meal was pleasant, but short. Marcus removed his pocket watch and glanced at its glass facing. "Ladies, our carriage awaits."

By the time we'd settled ourselves comfortably, the groomsman stopped dockside in front of the clipper ship. The sun shone brilliant yellow, but the cold winds of February winter cut like slivers of ice off the Atlantic waters, making the canvas sails flap. Reven and Marcus hurried us into our adjoining staterooms where warmth greeted us like an old friend. "Darling Bethanie, I hope you don't mind, but I'm going to meet with Reven and the ship's Captain to discuss business for a while; that'll give you and Annelle time to settle in and visit."

"As long as you promise me our nights together, I give you my permission." Marcus laughed, then swept me into his arms and kissed me soundly.

“ Bethanie, our nights will always be for us and the love we share. ” He kissed me again, then left to attend to his business matters. All of Bethanie’s things had been put away and I found myself at loose ends. I didn’t waste time thinking about what I would do with her items, but knew they wouldn’t be with me for any great length of time.

Before I went to visit Annelle, I decided to take a short walk to the accommodations afforded me on my first trip aboard Goddess of the Sea with Joshua and Phillipe. I knocked and received no response, so I opened it slowly, inch by inch. It had been turned into a storage room of sorts. Enough scant light spilled from the wick of my lantern to reveal a small personal traveling box that looked very familiar; it was caked in year’s worth of dust and grime. I sprang the tarnished gold clasp and raised the lid, then thumbed hurriedly through my misplaced daily diary of life, all the pages written before I had sailed onboard this clippership. A folded envelope dropped to the floor; I didn’t remember placing any loose stationary within its covers and as I bent over to pick it up, the rest of the contents dislodged and tumbled out. A packet of letters all addressed to me at Castle Desiree’ in Fredericksburg scattered across my feet. I retied them with their black ribbon and bundled them inside my dress pocket to read later when there was more light and privacy. I hid the box within my cloak and made haste back towards the stateroom I shared with Marcus. The door to Annelle’s cabin opened and she whisked me inside. “ Sister, you’re as pale as a ghost. ”

I set the wooden box on the trunk at the foot of the bed, then looked at my reflection in her mirror and laughed; I was grey with dust and cobwebs. I wiped away the dirt from my face and clothes and Annelle handed me a small goblet of red wine, filled with the nutrients Valera had supplied for my ocean voyage. I drank my fill and sat down beside her on the small settee.

“ What have you brought, Desiree’? ”

“ A part of me I thought was lost, but now is found at sea. ” I gave her the diary, but none of the personal letters.

“ Have long have you had this danger in your possession, Desiree’? ” She frowned. “ Marcus thinks that the sun rises and sets

with Bethanie, and he'd begin to ask questions that would be hard for you to answer as your sister. ”

“ Only since I did a little sightseeing and found it in the cabin that was assigned to me when I sailed to France with your father. ” Without proof, I wouldn't tell her that Joshua was my father as well.

“ I'll keep it safely tucked inside my trunk for you. ” She put it away just in time.

Marcus and Reven walked through the door. “ Ladies, the Captain wishes us to dine with him this evening. ” Marcus proffered his arm in my direction, then nodded towards Reven and Annelle. “ We'll meet you in his private quarters in thirty minutes. ” Inside our stateroom Marcus kissed me with passion and yearning.

“ My Bethanie, how I wanted to decline the Captain's invitation, but after the meal the rest of the night will be ours. I hope you're not disappointed. ”

“ Marcus, I know about men and their obligations. ” I sighed.

“ Bethanie, neither you nor Annelle will be displeased when you meet our esteemed Captain. ” Marcus began to whistle a tune I had heard before on this very ship; could it be that Joshua captained the Goddess of the Sea as a surprise for Annelle? He hadn't been present for my wedding to Marcus. In fact, he and Bethanie had never met as she'd stayed with friends when Uncle Joshua came to take me to France. A question arose in my mind at that remembrance; was the real reason I'd been shipped to France with Joshua because my father had confronted him with the fact that I was his daughter? Marcus didn't give me any time to ponder as I quickly freshened up.

Reven and Annelle had the privilege of walking ahead of us to the Captain's private quarters. The moment the door opened I knew for sure that our father was indeed Captain again. Annelle greeted Joshua with squeals of laughter and love, but I found it difficult to keep my own emotions in check, when I knew the truth. “ Father, I'd like to introduce you to Bethanie. ”

He took my hand and kissed the back of it in greeting. “ Bethanie, it's

an honor to have you grace us on this voyage to France. I'm so sorry we never got the chance to meet until now, but I can see that married life agrees with you. ”

“ Thank you, Uncle Joshua. ” I kissed his cheek and he smelled of warm spices. Memories of the good times I'd spent with him, my Aunt Madeliane and Annelle threatened to engulf me and I moved back into the safety of my husband's arms. I tried to be upbeat and happy for Annelle's sake, but blended and faded into the woodwork, tired of the lies and deceptions that I was practicing, wanting more than ever to be me instead of pretending to be Bethanie. I picked at the food which was served, and barely touched my wine. I was relieved when the meal was over with and Marcus and I said our goodnights, leaving Annelle to our father and her husband.

When we returned to our state-room, Marcus seemed worried.

“ Bethanie, is there something wrong; you didn't seem like yourself this evening. ”

“ Marcus, I'm overwhelmed; first the accident, then the excitement of our wedding, and getting to meet my Uncle Joshua. ”

I slowly undressed and slipped on one of Bethanie's frilly pink nightgowns; the strong scent of her Night Blooming Jasmine left me unsettled, distant from everyone and everything that I held near and dear. Marcus sensed my fragile state of mind and climbed into bed, cradling me within the shelter of his warm embrace, murmuring love words against my hair until I fell asleep.

The days sailed by and I regained control of myself, accepting the fact that I couldn't tell anyone the true thoughts which weighed hard and heavy on my heart and soul. My nights were spent in making sweet passionate love to my husband, in hopes that I'd be able to conceive a child with him. Annelle and I walked the decks every day and eventually I learned to cope with the ill-at-ease feelings I had while in the company of my father.

March 1st came in a flurry of activity. Pale light barely rose on the docks of Dunkirk; this time around there were no boisterous men who would dare whistle greetings to me, knowing all they could expect was to be fired by Marcus, Reven, or my father. The road from Dunkirk to Amiens hadn't

improved since the last time we had passed; it now consisted of nothing more than bumpy potholes from the recent rains. The trees bore no greenery and the skies were dark and overcast. Montague Cathedral was still a holy shrine to its religious believers, but we didn't stop for a visit. I breathed a huge sigh of relief as I had no desire to set foot into that home of personified evil. The rocking and swaying of the carriage lulled me to sleep and I woke when the groomsman stopped in front of a grey cobblestone building.

“ Bethanie, I do hope you enjoyed your nap, as we have a busy evening ahead of us. ” Marcus smiled as I lifted my head from his shoulder. Right before my eyes loomed Madame Chaumont's Boardinghouse on the outskirts of Paris; she was the hostess of this fine establishment and good friends with Joshua. As Marcus helped me out of the carriage, I saw Madame Chaumont throw welcoming arms around Annelle and Reven, then beam as Joshua kissed her on the cheek.

Bethanie had never met Madame Chaumont, so proper introductions were in order. “ Count Marcus, it's so nice to see you once again. ” I only spent a short amount of time in this wonderful lady's home, but she had befriended me and recognition dawned in her eyes.

“ And I never forget a face; Miss Desiree', you're as lovely as ever. ” Tears sprang to my eyes and fell down my cheeks when she mentioned my name. Joshua took her aside and explained the situation. “ I'm so sorry, Mistress Bethanie, I didn't mean to make you cry with my remarks about your sister. ” How I wanted to be released from the falsehoods and lies. Marcus handed me his handkerchief as a young maid came into view. “ Carina, please show Count Marcus and his wife to their room. ”

The second floor bedroom was the same one I had slept in on my first visit to Madame Chaumont's house. The bare oak floor was polished to a soft sheen underneath a colza oil lamp shaped like a Roman urn. The four-poster bed was covered with vermillion drapes that hung from a circular ceiling ring. They were pulled back to expose a matching bedspread and pillows of laced ivory. Near the double-paned window were two winged armchairs, upholstered in patterned toile de Jouy; one chair in red and one in blue. The festooned window blinds were a blend of both red and blue toile de Jouy and on the left side of the bed against the wall, was a mahogany dresser with a gilded mirror. My tears ceased and I smiled. “ Thank you, Carina. This room is perfect. ”

“ You are welcome, Madame. The evening meal will be served shortly. ”

“ Bethanie, I hope you’re not upset with Madame Chaumont. ” Marcus walked up behind me as I stared out the window into the quiet gloom of an empty street below. The scene below was far removed from the one that had greeted me on the August day I’d arrived with Joshua and Phillipe. The wide thoroughfare of the thriving metropolis bustled with noisy activity; there were carriages, wagons, and men on horseback. Couples and families with children strolled up and down the shaded boulevard and looked at the wares in the shop windows, then went inside to make purchases. “ Not much to see, is there? ” Marcus turned me around to face him. “ It’s not the outside that counts, but the inside. ” He placed his hand over my heart. “ This is where true beauty is revealed. ”

His eyes twinkled and he stepped over to a hanging mahogany wardrobe which had been recently added to the room furnishings. He opened the door and my attention was brought to rest on a brightly burnished copper beaded gown. The bodice featured a gently scooped neckline which was accented with black beading. The sleeves were long and curved in a shimmery black material, decorated in rosette shapings of copper colored beads, as was the skirt. Next to the dress was a full length hooded black velvet opera coat trimmed with red fox fur, which matched the copper colored beadings on my gown. The finishing touch to the outfit was a pair of black satin shoes, trimmed with copper rosette beading. I was totally surprised that the style and taste of this ensemble lent itself more to my personality than to Bethanie’s. Was Marcus trying to say something subconsciously? I threw my arms around his neck and kissed him with all the passionate love I felt in my heart. “ I’m glad that you like what I’ve chosen for you to wear this evening. ”

“ And just where might we be going so you can show me off? ” I swirled the dress in front of the mirror.

“ A magical night at the University Playhouse. I guarantee you’ll look stunning, even outshining the onstage actress who plays Farrah Rose. ” I remembered Phillipe telling me the story of Farrah Rose and Jacques O’Spades, two star-crossed lovers who eventually found love everlasting. “ Your Uncle Joshua told me that this particular play had been sold out for months in advance, but it seems he’s well connected in Parisian society. You must be sure to thank him for the tickets. ” Marcus tapped me on the shoulder. “ Bethanie, you seem lost, faraway from the real world. ”

“ I was thinking how much I adore my husband and his marvelous surprises. ” A knock came at the door. “ Who is it? ”

Annelle opened the door a crack and then all the way. “ Supper is being served. ” A huge smile adorned her face. “ I see that you approve of our husbands’ plans for us tonight? ” She oohed and aahed over the gown I still had pressed to my breast. “ Wait until you see what Reven bought for me. ” My heart lurched in sheer delight as she grabbed my hand and we marched downstairs for a late afternoon meal.

The meal began when we were served crabe au citron canapés. The lemon crab was spread on peppered crackers and was followed by; Salade d'Endives, Noix et Roquefort (Endive salad with walnuts and Roquefort Cheese), Filet Mignon aux Oignons-Gratin dauphinois (Pork Filet Mignon with Onions-Dauphiné oven baked potatoes), and a dessert of Clafoutis aux Abricots (Apricot batter-pudding). Madame Chaumont offered us the best of French Kir, a mixture of dry Burgundy white wine and black-currant liquor, while Annelle settled for cold milk.

The feast was excellent and the conversation lively and witty. Reven and Joshua entertained us with stories of the sea and Marcus told tales about the vineyards of Fredericksburg. The men retired to the smoking salon after dinner for fine Cuban cigars and cognac while Annelle and I went upstairs to dress for the evening’s festivities.

Annelle’s two piece gown was the color of wild violets; deep purple with thin silk stripings of white plum. The bodice had a high silk collar with an inset that formed a ‘V’ in its center portion with the colors reversed. The neck was adorned with a lilac/cream oval shaped quartz cameo in a gold tone setting. I leaned close and saw the high relief was Annelle’s profile. “ Sister, the beauty of your heart and soul can be seen in this piece of jewelry. ”

“ Yes, Desiree’; Reven gave this to me on our wedding day. I always wear it in his presence, but it travels with him on his sea journeys to remind him of the love we share. ”

A soft tapping sounded at the door. “ Are you ladies ready for our night out? ” Marcus and Reven entered the room. “ I do believe we’ll be the envy of every man in Paris this evening, Marcus. ” Reven took Annelle in his arms and kissed her, then helped her on with her matching wool wrapper.

The horse-drawn carriage clip-clopped for miles on the cobbled streets, then crossed the Seine River to the Left Bank and the University Of Paris. Heavy mist swirled around us, obscuring the buildings; even the gas-lit lamplights added little in the way of illumination as Marcus, Reven, Annelle, and I entered the playhouse and were shown to a private balcony box. The air crackled with festive chatter and waiters served us fluted glasses of French Champagne. Marcus raised his in a toast to a long productive marriage and as our glasses clinked, mine shattered. A broken shard sliced my left wrist and Marcus took it upon himself to kiss away my tainted blood; this was the second time I gave no heed to Valera’s admonition about the effects my life force would have upon him. “ My Darling Bethanie, this will make up for my clumsiness. ” Marcus had one more gift up his sleeve. Inside a crushed black velvet carrying bag was a pair of copper enameled opera glasses with a lorgnette style handle. I adjusted the settings so I could better see the lime lit stage when the play commenced. I thanked him with a kiss upon his perfect lips as the curtains parted.

My mind wandered away from the reality of the night as the story unfolded against a backdrop of the Three Graces Lake I had visited with Phillipe. Conflicting emotions ran the gamut within my heart, changing from a loving friendship with the sweet endearing man I had first met, into a burning hatred for the man I now perceived him to be. I wanted immediate answers to questions, but knew none would be forthcoming until I read that packet of personal letters from him which lay hidden within my trunk. It seemed as if mere minutes had passed when I heard the thunderous roar of clapping hands and shouts of bravo.

The hour was past midnight when we returned to our rooms at Madame Chaumont’s. “ Marcus, thank you so much for this perfect evening and so many surprises. ” I couldn’t contain my love for him and threw my arms around his neck, kissing him deeply as flames of passion grew inside of me. I gazed into his eyes, seeing a faint red-tinged glimmer circling his pupils; they glowed like coal embers, the first of many signs that something was amiss.

He was suddenly cool and distant. “ Bethanie, we need our rest; in only a few hours we’ll be on our way to Your Uncle Joshua’s home. ” His rejection left me with bad dreams of Jacques O’Spades and Farrah Rose. I tossed and turned, whimpering with night terrors; when Jacques finally found her, she’d withered away and died, replaced by an exotic Night Blooming Jasmine that Jacques loved more than he had ever loved Farrah Rose. I woke with a start; Marcus was nowhere in sight and that frightened me to no end.

The door creaked open, and Marcus tiptoed over to the dresser. He set down a tray of coffee and croissants and honey butter, then turned up the colza oil lamp to brighten the room. Quicker than a lightning bolt I jumped out of bed, clutched him tightly, and held on for dear life. “ Marcus...”

“ My Precious Love, you’re trembling. ” He guided me over to one of the wingchairs and I sat comfortably on his lap. Marcus embraced my body and smoothed my hair, offering me nurturing warmth.

“ I had nightmares, ” I sniffled. “ I thought you’d left me. ” I took a deep breath in order to calm myself.

“ Bethanie, I’ll never leave you; you’re the love of my life, now and always, but I’m terribly concerned about your physical and mental health. I don’t think I gave you enough time to recuperate from your accident before we went ahead with our wedding and the sea voyage. ” He sighed. “ I thought long and hard about the best solution to our problem and took the liberty of speaking to your Uncle Joshua before he left earlier this morning. He’s agreed to let you spend some time at his home while I make sure that Castle Desiree’ is ready for your arrival. ” He saw my crestfallen face. “ Bethanie, I won’t be leaving Nancy until Monday, March 9th, so we’ll still have plenty of time to be together. I’ll return on Monday, March 23rd to collect you; two weeks of bed rest and being coddled by your Aunt and Cousin will do you a world of good. ”

Marcus was right about being pampered and indulged by these two women I loved and adored. I considered his words and weighed them against what I knew I needed; strength and fortitude to fight Sheridan while having the undaunted assistance of Valera and Gustav. I consented with smiles and kisses. “ Marcus, as long as our being apart is not permanent, your idea has merit. I love you more than I ever thought possible. ”

The rain-dappled evergreen trees and holly bushes sparkled like cut diamonds in the glinting sun as we rode to the Lorraine Region of France, but my chest tightened as I received a vision from Kermes Twa; the water-droplets were tears she shed for me, but the question was why? Did they portend a future of torment and pain or happiness and joy? Her constant answer was, “ Life always unfolds its mysteries in ways that the human mind can never conceive of. ”

This time the groomsman didn't travel anywhere near the city of Nancy proper, but kept to countryside roads and lanes. He turned into a long curving driveway lined with weeping redwoods. I said a silent prayer of thanksgiving to Kermes Twa for allowing my safe return to the grey stone-worked DuMond House.

Marcus and Reven departed from the carriage first; after Annelle and I stepped down, we traversed the soggy lawn to the front door which was opened by Joshua and my Aunt. There were more than enough hugs and kisses to go around and then I was properly introduced to Madeliane. “ Dearest Bethanie, welcome to our home; I trust you'll enjoy your stay with us. ”

“ Thank you, Aunt Madeliane. ” The foyer still served as a cloak and boot room; we hung our muddy coats on wooden pegs and put our wet shoes in the recessed area below them to be cleaned. A grand staircase rose to our right, but Joshua opened the double doors to his left, inviting us into his own unique seaman's haven from the world at large. There were no wall sconces to cast out the gloom, but authentic ship lanterns that added a touch of the sea to dry land. Prominently displayed above the fireplace was a painting of ‘Goddess of the Sea’, which had been a 50th birthday gift to Joshua from J.E. Buttersworth. The light from the blazing fireplace cast leaping shadow flames against the white ceiling and the polished geometric-patterned parquet flooring. The walls were divided by a wooden railing; the lower half was wallpapered in wide segments of slate blue, contrasting with thin stripings of bright red and white, while the top portion was clean white, setting off all the pictures and portraits which adorned it.

The furnishings were homey and comfortable. The huge secretary in the corner housed all of Joshua's papers, books, and writings. Surrounding the square cherry wood table were cloth-covered cushioned chairs that matched the slate blue of the walls, their curved legs inlaid with ebonized dolphin

designs.

My Aunt rang a small silver bell, and refreshments of sliced beef sandwiches, fruitcake, coffee and tea were served. Talk of family and friends soon turned to business matters as the men excused themselves and retired to the library. “ Bethanie, I hope you won’t mind if I leave you to your own amusements for a while. ” Madeliane glanced in Annelle’s direction.

“ Not at all. I’m sure that Cousin Annelle must be past tired. ” Annelle had yawned her way through the entire meal and could barely keep her eyes open.

“ If you wish to rest, your room is upstairs, the 3rd door on the left. ” She and Annelle kissed my cheek, then linked arms as I watched them walk upstairs.

The spectacular grand piano was a motionless sentinel in the corner and the rosewood gleamed as I fingered the black and white keys. Time seemed to slip away and I felt as if I had never left the only place I’d been accepted and cherished as me. I closed the doors to give myself some privacy. Anyone who knew Bethanie was well aware she had no ear for music, whereas music had been a comfort and balm in my loneliest days. I began to play and sing one of my mother’s favorite songs by W.W. Balfe; the words to ‘Then You’ll Remember Me’ seemed fitting for both our lives.

‘When other lips and other hearts
Their tales of love shall tell,
In language whose excess imparts
The power they feel so well.
There may, perhaps, in such a scene
Some recollection be,
Of days that have as happy been,
And you’ll remember me.’

My serenade abruptly ended when I saw Marcus out of the corner of my eye; I hadn’t noticed him slip quietly into the room and take a sentry’s post by the doorway. Even at that distance I saw his lips mouth my name, but he didn’t say it aloud. “ Bethanie, is this a side of yourself you’ve kept hidden from me? ” He didn’t seem at all pleased, and would’ve said more, but was interrupted by Joshua.

“ Dearest Niece, how you remind me of both your mother and sister before they passed into the great beyond. ”

Thoughts of my mother brought sadness to my heart, but the tears I cried were of raging hatred for Bethanie. She was doubly blessed with two lives, while I had been relegated to having none. I was living the life she was supposed to share with Marcus and she was living in her own chosen world with Phillipe by her side. The harder I tried to stop the flow of liquid salt that ran down my cheeks, the faster the sobs wracked my body.

Marcus ran to where I sat on the piano bench, contrite as all his reasoning power centered on making his precious Bethanie feel better. “ My Darling Wife...” His voice faded away and I fainted into the cradling strength of his arms, having no concrete memories or relevant dreams until I woke up to bright sunlight streaming through parted curtains of periwinkle blue. I would swear on my Mother’s grave that I was back in my own room at the house in Springfield where I kept hearing my sister’s name being called over and over again from a great distance. The mere mention of Bethanie made me ill and I covered my ears to block out the noise.

I had no concept of reality as an emotional dam of hallucinating sickness swept over me, hurtling me back to when I first set foot in France.

Chapter 15

From my position between Uncle Joshua and Phillipe on the foredeck of Goddess of the Sea, I could see our close proximity to land. “ Desiree’, even though we’ll soon be making port in Dunkirk, you must obey my orders for your own safety. You’ll stay in your quarters as I have business to attend to in town and Phillipe must oversee the transfer of the ship’s cargo. ” He gave me a kiss on the cheek and left me standing with his First Mate.

I wanted to be on terra firma with bantering, boisterous crowds, but felt sadness in having only myself for company once again. Tears crept into my vision and as I tried to swipe them away, Phillipe gently dried them with his handkerchief.

“ Desiree’, the solid ground of Dunkirk is a very real temptation, but dangers await an unaccompanied beautiful young female without proper male escorts such as your Uncle Joshua or myself. ” The sun began to set and we walked towards my cabin, then stopped in front of the door. “ I only have a few minutes left before duty calls. ” Phillipe raised the back of my hand to the warmth of his lips and delightful sensations coursed through my body. He turned my hand over and placed a small leather bound book within my palm. “ Read this for company tonight and I’ll see you in the morning, my Little Mermaid. ”

“ Thank you, Phillipe. ” My words echoed down the hallway as he strode out of sight, whistling a jaunty tune. I hurried into my cabin and lit the lantern wick, wondering all the while about the book’s contents. I fluffed my bed pillows and sat with my back propped against them, then untied the black ribbon which held the book together. It fell open, revealing a folded parchment note that had been inserted between the pages. So what if curiosity killed the cat? I carefully uncreased the paper.

‘Infinite Waves

As the majesty of infinite waves
Grandly flow to and fro
They dance among the ancient stones
Water washed and smooth

Centuries of whiteness
unceasingly caressed
By the pounding of the Ocean’s Heart

They speak of her grace
Effortless form and movement
Eternal drumbeats
Steady and rhythmic

Her imperial countenance is praised
From morning’s early sunrise
To evening’s twilight sunset

My Little Mermaid, Sweet Desiree’,
I hope your journey on this endless expanse of water

The infinite bosom of the Atlantic Ocean
Has been the beginning of the life you have always dreamed of.’
It was signed Phillippe.

I recalled the maps about France in Uncle Joshua’s book. Phillippe had marked the route to Paris; it would be an adventurous new beginning into unknown territory for me, answering all my questionings about the lay of the land and the friendliness of the people. I closed my eyes and slept, awaking to a sharp rap at my door. “ Desiree’, are you awake? Be ready to depart in an hour’s time. ”

“ Yes, Uncle Joshua. ” All my baggage was ready for transport, and my heart jumped into my throat when I opened the door and found Phillippe ready to knock.

He bowed low in front of me, his blond hair tied back with a black ribbon. He straightened up, his smile bright with promise. “ I’ve come to escort you to the pier where our carriage awaits. ” Phillippe proffered his arm. “ Desiree’, I hope you feel the same as I do. ”

I hesitated for a minute. “ I’m not precisely sure what you mean by that statement. ”

He laughed. “ My Little Mermaid, I only meant that you and I are both entering a new phase in our lives. ” I gave him a questioning look. “ Desiree’, out of the goodness of his heart, your Uncle Joshua has arranged for me to attend the University Of Paris to study Naval Architecture beginning on Monday, August 28th. Classes start in 5 days. ” His eyes sparkled as he related the information. “ I also think he feels much better knowing I can keep my eye on you. ”

“ Phillippe, having a friend in Paris would be wonderful. ” My private thoughts lent themselves to the fact that he was a dashing male and I’d be the envy of every other female in town.

We met Uncle Joshua on the upper deck, and proceeded to the gangplank where I had my first glimpse of France. The docks of Dunkirk weren’t much different from the docks of New York City; they were filled with sweaty bare-chested men, shouting to each other, not in English, but in a French dialect I didn’t understand. Some of the dock workers called out to Phillippe,

who waved and answered them in their native tongue.

“ What did they say to you, Phillipe? ”

“ You’re quite the inquisitive one, Desiree’ . ” Phillipe and Uncle Joshua both sported huge grins. “ They wished they were as fortunate as your Uncle and me in having such a beautiful woman to grace their arms. ”

My cheeks blushed rouge-red, but my heart and eyes gleamed with joy. No man had ever voiced an opinion of me as being beautiful or graceful.

“ Uncle Joshua, is that the honest truth? ”

“ Niece, would I lie to you? ” He turned and looked me straight in the eye. “ Desiree’, in my own humble estimation, you are the epitome of loveliness and elegance, even when awash in ocean spray! ” His words were filled with good-humored mirth.

His tone was teasing, but he made me feel loved and cared for in ways my father and sister never had. I kissed his bristly cheek and whispered, “ I love you Uncle Joshua; you are truly the best. ”

“ Have I been good enough to earn a kiss of honor from you, my Little Mermaid? ” Phillipe was charming, and I saw Uncle Joshua give him a wink, which was as good as permission.

I gave Phillipe a quick peck on the smoothness of his freshly shaved cheek, feeling on top of the world. All the dockworkers had stopped their various tasks in order to observe what would happen; amidst cheers, whoops, and handclapping, Phillipe touched his hand to his forehead in a grand salute, and we casually walked to a plain, but sturdy carriage. The two massive horses attached to it pawed the ground and snorted, ready to be off.

The road from Dunkirk to Amiens passed through green-treed forests and prickly underbrush. Contrasting sunlight played tricks on my eyes as grotesque shadow forms took shape in my imagination. There were few farmhouses along the way, but many gentle meadows, dotted with various colors of blooming summer flowers.

Uncle Joshua kept the conversation flowing and easy on my mind as he and Phillipe talked of life on the sea. “ Desiree’, it’s time to stop for lunch. ” I

glanced out the window and saw an impressive cathedral set in the vast middle of nowhere.

A man in priestly garb came out to meet us. He opened the carriage door, extended his hand and helped me out, closely followed by Phillippe and Uncle Joshua. Phillippe and the priest hugged like long lost relatives. “Desiree’, please allow me to introduce you to Father Quimper, caretaker and religious leader of Montague Cathedral. And you know her Uncle Joshua.” He and my Uncle shook hands.

My thoughts and smile were friendly. “Hello, this is a beautiful church.”

His eyes lit up with swelling pride. “May I call you Desiree’?” I nodded. “I’ve found my life’s calling within these magnificent walls and on these sacred and hallowed grounds. Would you like to hear the history of Montague Cathedral while we eat?”

“Yes, Father Quimper, most assuredly.” My stomach growled, as I hadn’t eaten breakfast. “I’m quite famished.”

Phillippe said, “Desiree’, you took the words right out of my mouth. I’m hoping that we’ll be served fruits de mer; fruits of the sea.”

“Cook’s specialty.” Father Quimper led the way to the cathedral entrance and we followed him single file down a wide corridor, lit red by the afternoon sunlight streaming through large stained glass windows. The dining hall had a massive wooden table with one long bench on each of its four sides for seating.

“Father Quimper, are there any other people who live here with you?”

“Yes, Desiree’. There are priests and monks dwelling here, but they don’t usually have contact with the general public; the performance of their spiritual duties is much more important.” He rang a small brass bell, and young male servants brought in water bowls and small hand towels, and huge dinner plates filled with prawns, mussels, and oysters still in their shells. The men drank glasses of dry white wine that had been pressed from the grape arbors owned by the cathedral and I was offered sweet apple juice to drink with our feast from the sea. Father Quimper began his history lesson. “Back in the 11th century, a monk named Montague devoted his

entire life to the poor and down-trodden. He built a small chapel for them which still stands at the edge of the woods. A rich man came by to worship one day and was so impressed by the monk's piety, that he bestowed the gift of this building to house a new order of monks. It took 300 years to complete everything as you see it standing today. " He paused mid-fork. " I'd encourage you to stroll through the landscaped rose gardens after the dessert of cheese and fresh fruits. " He seemed eager to keep me occupied while he discussed business with Uncle Joshua and Phillipe.

" May I please be excused, Uncle Joshua? " I was eager to see the fragrant flowers and also hoped to catch more than a fleeting glimpse of the chapel that Father Quimper had spoken of.

Uncle looked at his watch. " We need to leave no later than 3 pm, Desiree' . " I gave him no time for other admonitions, but escaped through a side door to the outside world of red and yellow roses bordered by blue cornflowers and white peonies. I leisurely walked the meandering trail through the intoxicating scent of the full-blooming roses, stopping here and there as purple and green butterflies danced around me. The pathway straightened out beneath a tunneled arbor of lavender, while up above birds twittered and sang love songs to one another. I felt as if God Himself had granted me entrance into the Pearly Gates of Heaven and I wouldn't have long to wait for white-winged Angels to fly overhead, strumming their harps of gold.

A short distance past the end of the arbor was the small greystone chapel; it was constructed with a steeply pitched roof and narrow gothic windows. The front doorway beckoned and I hurried towards it, intending to have a look inside. I rattled the silver doorknobs and pushed as hard as I could, but it was bolted shut from the inside. I almost turned around to leave, but decided it wouldn't hurt to check the rest of the building. There were no doors on the east side and I had no better luck at the back of the chapel, which bordered the edge of the woods. They seemed darkly dangerous, and my vivid imagination brought evil predators to mind. Recessed on the west side was an inconspicuous door. I slowly turned the brass handle and was surprised that it swung open so easily. I ducked into the cool interior, never thinking I might be considered an unholy vandal.

All the myriad black altar candles were lit, eerily flickering against statues of marble sphinxes, their outstretched lion paws waiting to pounce on unwary visitors. I screamed as a heavy hand fell on my shoulder. A monk dressed in

blood red robes and carrying an ebony staff of intertwined snakes hissed at me. “ You’ll pay mightily for the sin of desecration. No outsider, much less a woman, has ever been allowed to set foot inside this sanctuary! ” His countenance was obscured by a huge cowl and his dreadful laugh was filled with gleeful malice. “ I never forget a face! ”

Instead of the chapel being the gateway to Heaven, it turned out to be the gateway to Hell! I ran out, my feet flying like a sudden gust of wind. I took no time for second glances as I had no intentions of ending up like Lot’s Wife. Salt was not my seasoning of choice, and being in close proximity to Satan held no longstanding appeal.

I woke up amidst exciting dread, remembering the resounding slap across my cheek when Father found me sitting alone in the parlor with one of his divorced friends. “ You’re of the same ilk as your mother; a no-good whore! ” I had no idea what those words meant, but knew for certain that today my Uncle Joshua, Captain of my father’s clipper ship, Goddess of the Sea, was supposed to arrive and escort me to a private all girl’s school in France.

I thought I heard voices calling Bethanie’s name, but my father had sent her away to stay with friends for a few days, stating in no uncertain terms that he didn’t want her delicate mind tainted by my latest exploits nor did he want the family name maligned by slanderous gossip. I opened my eyes to a black-robed priest, performing last rites for someone who was near to death. My father wasn’t in sight, but a small group of people huddled near the doorway, tears streaming down their faces. Was this Bethanie’s idea of a cruel joke, her way of telling me I was now dead to my family? I rolled my eyes, shook my head, and let out a huge sigh. “ I get the message, already, so everyone can quit acting. Oh, and if anyone passes my Uncle Joshua on the way out, please send him up to me. ”

A tall good-looking man with dark curly hair stepped over and held my hand. “ My dear Bethanie, we thought the worst had happened when we couldn’t wake you up. ” His eyes were red and raw in misery and he definitely played his grieving part to the hilt.

“ Rest assured I feel perfectly fine, although I do wish you’d quit rubbing it

in by calling me Bethanie. ” He must be an amateur actor if he couldn’t get his lines straight. “ You know perfectly well that I’m her twin sister, Desiree’, the one who’s persona non grata here. ” I heard murmurings of discontent among the onlookers as I said my name.

“ But Desiree’ died more than 18 months ago and is buried in America. ” The young gentleman wept in a fresh torrent of teardrops and I wondered how he managed that feat.

I patted his hand and bit my lower lip to contain the laughter which swelled up inside of me, deciding to go along with him until the charade finally concluded. “ If she’s in the United States, then where are we at this moment? ”

“ At your Uncle Joshua’s estate outside of Nancy, France. ” He frowned. “ Have you no memory of our wedding on Valentine’s Day? ”

I gasped out loud in a fit of giggles. If nothing else, Bethanie had managed to lighten my heavy heart. “ Surely you jest! For your information, my father would never give a marriage consent for either of his daughters to a man he’s never met; furthermore, I’m far too young for your consideration. ” When I pulled my hand away his facial features showed hurt perplexity. “ Even though I’m much more mature than my 16 years would lead you to believe, I must finish school. ” I stared him dead in the eye. “ According to my father, I’m like Eve in the Bible story of creation and all men are apples of worming temptation, forbidden fruit that I should have no dealings with. My Uncle Joshua is the only man who’s not off limits to me, so there’s no way on God’s green earth I could or would be married to you. ” I was suddenly overcome with weariness. “ Enough of this farce. Get out so I can prepare to sail for France. ”

I spied a beautiful young lady with auburn tresses standing near the end of my bed. Ah, she must be the companion my father said would be traveling with me onboard ship. I noticed her impending motherhood condition and swiftly grabbed her hand before she turned around to leave. “ You must stay and help me dress. By the way, what’s your name? ”

“ I’m your cousin, Annelle. ”

“ Uncle Joshua’s daughter? ” I gazed at her graceful loveliness and knew we

would become best of friends. I laid my hands upon the warmth of her ripening belly, feeling tiny flutters and kicks, then pressed my lips to her rounded waist and hugged her tight. “ I hope to have many babies when I get married someday. ” I yawned and stretched, and had every intention of rising, but a foul-smelling cloth was pressed to my nose and lips and I drifted off to sleep like one of the dead.

Common-sense reasoning replaced my alarm as I distanced myself from the chapel. That monk had every right to his extreme anger; my intrusion had disturbed the sacred harmony and spiritual order which existed within those hallowed walls. I slowed to a walk and caught my breath, hearing a faint voice call my name. “ Desiree’, where are you? ”

I glanced at my watch; it was close to the hour of our departure from Montague Cathedral. “ Here I am, Uncle Joshua. ” I ran towards his open arms.

“ I thought we’d have to send out a search party for you, Desiree’. ” Uncle Joshua squeezed me tightly, and kissed my forehead. “ If anything were to happen, I’d never forgive myself. ”

“ But you’re fine, aren’t you, Desiree’? ” Phillipe treated me like an adult who could face and overcome difficult circumstances.

“ I was distracted by the beauty and peace of the gardens, Uncle. If you can see fit to spare a few more moments, I want to thank Father Quimper for his hospitality and tell him good-bye. ”

As if on cue, the kindly priest walked out of the Cathedral into the sunlight. “ Desiree’, it’s been a delightful pleasure to have met you. Maybe God in His eternal goodness will grant us the privilege of meeting again someday. ” He kissed my cheek, stepped back, then proceeded to cross himself while saying many ‘Hail Marys’.

An unguarded notion lingered in the back of my mind; Father Quimper’s actions were done to protect himself from me. Did he know of my illegal entrance into the chapel? ” Thank you, Father Quimper. We never know what God holds in store for us. ” Sitting in the carriage beside Phillipe, I

leaned out the window until Montague Cathedral faded from view, but I mulled over the events that remained fresh in my memory. Certain conclusions began to take shape, and they left me feeling uneasy.

Uncle Joshua sat across from us and intruded upon my musings. “Desiree’, do tell us about your afternoon in the gardens.”

“Uncle Joshua, the rose gardens were magnificent and their perfume enveloped me like a sweet-scented cloud. Nearby was a clear pond, filled with splashing fish that glinted like golden coins in a fountain of bright green lily pads.” I smiled as a cold chill ran down my spine. “I felt like I was in the midst of the Garden of Eden, a piece of Heaven here on earth.” But my inner wisdom told me I’d been introduced to one of the Devil’s Disciples from Hell. My mind floated from one end of the religious spectrum to the other.

“Desiree’, you seem lost in your thoughts; is there something you’re not divulging?” Uncle Joshua looked worried.

I yawned. “Only that I’m worn out from running to make it back to the Cathedral in time.”

“Dearest Niece, then close your eyes and take a nap.” He removed his coat and placed it underneath my head for a pillow. It smelled of sweet spices that warmed my heart and blocked out all visions of evil. Phillippe moved over to sit beside my Uncle so they could discuss further business matters.

Someone shook my shoulder. “Desiree’, we’ve arrived at the Clovis Lodge in Amiens.” I stretched, then climbed out with Phillippe’s help. A maidservant carried a lantern up the darkened stairway to my room at the end of the hall. She lit white candles, then brought a bowl of warm water and a bar of lavender scented soap for my use. After removing my clothes and washing up, I slipped into the lacy green nightgown that she had laid out on the bed. My luggage had been stacked underneath the window and I searched through the smallest trunk for Phillippe’s poetry book, hastily untying it, wanting to read his letter again. When I uncreased his parchment note, another piece of writing paper slid out. My heart was all aflutter, until I saw the handwriting; it was big and bold, a definite obscenity to my delicate senses.

‘Do you think you can escape the fate of your destiny? Your profanity has doomed you to life beyond Hell.’

There was no signature. Those terrible words sank into my mind and I drifted off into a restless sleep, consumed with nightmares about living in Hades for eternity.

My horrible dreams came to an end with a noisy tapping on my door. “Desiree’, I hope you’re up and dressed. Breakfast is being served and our carriage to Paris awaits.” It was pitch black on the stairway; I carried Phillippe’s book and letters in my right hand and grumbled as melting tallow burned my left hand. After a light meal of croissants, fresh creamery butter and raspberry jam, we were on our way to Paris. Uncle Joshua rode topline with the driver, as the weather promised an abundance of warmth and sunshine.

“Phillippe, now that we have some time alone I want to ask you a question.”

He smiled and gathered my hand in his. “I’m your humble servant, my Little Mermaid.”

“I found this strange note along with your first letter to me, Phillippe.”

“And what did you think of my message, Dear Desiree’?” His blue eyes pierced mine.

I blushed in spite of myself. “I gained insights as to why you love sailing the ocean so much and your friendship is an added bonus to beginning the rest of my life in Paris.” I frowned. “Phillippe, what I just gave to you scares me.”

He scarcely glanced at the unfolded page. “Ah, Desiree’. I have no idea how this piece of meaningless drivel wound up in the book I gave to you.” He hugged me close. “Forget that you ever saw it and suggest a topic that we can talk of to ease your mind.”

“Tell me about the City of Lights.”

“All right, My Little Mermaid. History and geography lessons will keep your mind occupied.” His eyes lit up as he talked. “Paris is French

language, French thought, and French action defined; to the civilized world, Paris is France. ” He spoke as a man who hadn’t seen the woman he loves in many years. “ The capital and largest city is located on the Seine River, 100 miles from its Atlantic Ocean outlet at Le Havre. The river contains two islands; Ile de la Cite’ and the smaller Ile Saint Louis. The original site of Paris on the Ile de la Cite’ and the adjacent Rive Gauche, which is the Left or South Bank is still the center of the city. ”

“ Have you been to Paris many times before, Phillippe? ”

“ Desiree’, I was born in the heart of that magnificent city and named after King Phillip Augustus II, whose Charter for the University of Paris identified the three parts of medieval Paris: the Cite’, on the island; the town or ville, which was once the quarters of the guilds, on the Right Bank; and the university and academic quarters on the Left Bank. In fact, I was chosen to attend the university to study for the priesthood, but the sea called me to my destiny. ”

I had no set ideas when it came to my own life. “ Please tell me more, Phillippe. ”

“ As you wish, My Little Mermaid. There are the public English Gardens that were laid out during the reign of Napoleon III; before I ran off to sea, I visited them as often as I could. My other two favorite spots to roam are the Luxembourg Gardens on the Left Bank, and the Parc Monceau, both originally meant only for royalty. ” His eyes and voice held a dreamy quality. “ I intend to rediscover my city of birth while I attend the University. ”

“ I only had the gardens surrounding my father’s house to visit and certainly no parks in my little corner of the world. ”

“ Desiree’, let me be your personal guide to all I hold near and dear in Paris. ” He laced his fingers through mine. “ Among the most important older constructions in French architecture are the Cathedral of Notre Dame, on the Ile de la Cite’, which was begun in 1163; the nearby Sainte-Chapelle, a magnificent Gothic structure built in 1248; and the Louvre, a museum which was once a royal palace. Some of the better known thoroughfares are the Rue de Rivoli, the Boulevard du Montparnasse, and the tree-lined Champs Elysees, laid out in 1667. ”

Passing through forests of dark greens, dappled with hints of sunshine, I pictured Paris as a sparkling diamond, surrounded by the rest of France. Phillipe and I talked away the morning hours, but it seemed as if only minutes had passed when the driver stopped in front of a grey cobblestone building. “ Desiree’, I’m going to get settled at the university, but will return later this afternoon and show you a special place I remember from my childhood days. ”

Phillipe climbed to the seat which had been vacated by my Uncle. The carriage blended in with the street traffic, and was soon out of sight. “ Desiree’, this will be our home for the next few days, until final arrangements are made for your introduction into Madame Otto’s School for Girls. ”

The noise of a thriving metropolis greeted me; I watched wagons, carriages and riders on horseback travel the wide thoroughfare and smiled in anticipation of being a part of Paris. The out skirting street bustled with activity; men, women and children strolled up and down the shaded boulevard, looking through shop windows and wandering inside to make purchases.

Uncle Joshua offered me his hand and we walked through the front doorway where a lady dressed in black met us. “ Joshua, you’re as handsome as ever. ” She kissed him on the cheek, then turned to me. “ You must be Desiree’; a lovely name that suits you to perfection. ”

“ Desiree’, let me introduce you to Madame Chaumont, my good friend and our hostess. ” She hugged me and I felt at ease in her presence.

“ Madame Chaumont, thank you for your welcome and your hospitality. ”

“ I know your ride was a long one and you must be famished. My chef is preparing his specialty of chicken cassoulet containing corn and peas in a rich white sauce, as we speak. ” A young maid came into view. “ Jossette, please show Miss Desiree’ to her rooms. ”

She curtsied. “ Please follow me. ” I slowly traipsed behind Jossette, in order to hear what Madame Chaumont was saying to Uncle Joshua. “ I must show you a cablegram I received this morning. ” Their voices grew faint as

Jossette opened the door to my second floor bedroom. Sunshine gleamed off the polished bare oak floor. The four-poster bed was covered with vermilion drapes hanging from a circular ceiling ring. They were pulled back to reveal a matching bedspread, and pillows of laced ivory. Near the double window were two winged armchairs, upholstered in a toile de Jouy pattern; one chair in red and one in blue. The festooned window blinds were a blend of both red and blue toile de Jouy and on the left side of the bed, against the wall, was a mahogany dresser with a gilded mirror. A colza oil lamp, shaped like a Roman urn, supplied light for the evening's darkness. I turned to Jossette and smiled.

She said, " I take it you are well pleased with this room? "

" Very much so, Jossette. It's nothing like the one at my home in the United States. "

" Desiree' . " Uncle Joshua was in a jovial mood. " Your father sent me a cablegram insisting that Madame Otto's School was not up to his standards, so Paris won't be home for you, after all. "

I wanted to sit on the bed and cry, releasing all the pent-up pain I felt. My father always had a way of ruining my life, just when everything seemed to be in place and settled. I sighed deeply.

" Uncle Joshua, my father never waivers in his need to see me unhappy, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised. "

" Dearest Niece, this is a reason for celebration. " He held me close to him, and whispered in my ear, " It'll be all right, Desiree'. I have an offer that your father can't well refuse. " I saw the truth of his words in his eyes. " Your Aunt Madeliane runs an all girls school in the Lorraine region of France. We'll enroll you there, while I take time off from being a ship's captain so we can give you the kind of family life you deserve. "

Tears of happiness streamed down my cheeks. " Uncle Joshua, you'd give up being Ship's Captain for me? " I threw my arms around his neck.

" You're the best Uncle in the world and I love you with all my heart. " I was silent for a moment.

" Desiree', I realize your concerns center around the fact that Phillipe will remain in Paris, but schooling is his major concern and in order to become a

refined young lady that I can be proud of, you'll also have to study hard. ”
He was serious, but his eyes held a twinkle.

“ That’s the only way to get back into your Father’s good graces and the only way you can return home to live. ”

“ Uncle Joshua, Phillipe has become a wonderful friend and I’ll definitely miss him, but my father is someone I’ll never, ever miss! ”

“ Your feelings about your father are crystal clear, but what of your sister? Being twins should make the bonds of sisterhood that much stronger or am I mistaken? ”

“ Bethanie always sided with my father, letting herself shine in his eyes, while my dreams and plans were closeted in darkness. I find it strange that we have the same blood running through our veins. ” I stared at the city of Paris, wondering what the future held in store. “ My father and sister have no need of me, nor I of them. ” I shivered. “ I can’t bear the thought of living with them in Springfield. ”

“ But what of eating a pleasant lunch with our hostess? ” Uncle Joshua held out his hand, and we walked grandly down the stairs to a small, cheerful dining area. Phillipe stretched his arms out and I ran to his embrace.

“ Desiree’, even though you won’t be staying in Paris as we thought, I’m sure you can persuade your Uncle Joshua to bring you to Paris for holidays and special occasions. ” We both stared at my uncle.

“ Your Aunt Madeliane will have the final say. Perhaps if you keep your grades up, we can reward you with a family visit around Christmastime. ”

“ Did I hear mention of a return visit? ” A lovely young woman with dark auburn tresses and eyes the color of jade ran to Uncle Joshua and kissed him. “ Father, there are times I doubted I’d feel your arms around me again. ”

He hugged her close, then introduced us. “ Annelle, this is your cousin, Desiree’. ”

She encased my hands in hers, and kissed both of my cheeks. “ Welcome to France, Cousin Desiree’. ”

“ Thank you, Annelle. ” She continued to hold my hand as we sat down to lunch. Madame Chaumont, Uncle Joshua, Annelle and Phillipe talked of people, politics, and places within the city proper, but nothing was mentioned about my not being able to stay in Paris.

Chapter 16

The early afternoon meal did wonders for my disposition; my hunger was satisfied and I no longer had any misgivings about Uncle Joshua loving me. In time I hoped that Annelle and my Aunt Madeliane would feel the same. “ Desiree’ , ” Phillipe shook my shoulder, “ are you so lost in dreamland that you didn’t hear my question? ” I gave him a puzzled look and he laughed heartily. “ I merely asked if you’d care to stroll down the avenue before I settle in my rooms at the university. ”

“ Uncle Joshua? ” He nodded his consent, and I kissed his cheek. Good manners overcame my desire to have a few hours alone with Phillipe. “ Annelle, would you care to join us? ”

“ Desiree’ , you’re a dear for asking, but you and Phillipe have a nice afternoon, while I visit with my father. ” She hugged me and tears came to my eyes. “ Is something wrong? ” Annelle wiped the liquid from my face.

“ In my entire life I’ve never felt this loved. ” I beamed with delight.

“ Phillipe, make sure you have her back here before twilight; the rabble rousers present a very dangerous situation. ”

“ Aye, aye, Captain. ” Phillipe saluted smartly, took my hand and we walked out the front door, turned left and blended into the crowd. “ Desiree’ , as much as I adore the hustle and bustle of the city streets, I know a serene, quiet place where we can talk without shouting to be heard. It’s not far from here. ”

“ Lead on, Phillipe. ” There was a small alleyway between a curio shop and an eating establishment and I picked up my skirts to avoid wash water puddles that had pooled on the redbrick passageway. Our shoes crunched on a graveled path at the other end of the buildings as we made our way to a sizable lake filled with many canoeing couples. Ducks lined the edges,

waiting to be fed with breadcrumbs from pink cheeked children. An abundance of full-blooming rose bushes in varying shades and colors lent their perfume to the air surrounding us. On a grassy green knoll in the near distance, families sat on plaid blankets eating from their picnic baskets. The city seemed many miles away. “ Phillipe, this is a lovely setting; thank you for bringing me here. ”

“ This used to be my favorite spot to visit when I was just a boy. I spent many happy hours playing, swimming and fishing. ” He sighed. “ Of course, that was when my family owned all this property. ” He swept his arm in front of him and continued.

“ My family came upon hard times and my father was forced by law to sell most of his land in order to pay taxes to the king and church. ” His eyes glittered with enormous hatred. “ They out and out robbed my family of everything, leaving us to beg on the streets. I’d been chosen to join the priesthood, but with all that transpired I had no use for religion and no love of France, so I ran off to sea and have never once regretted my decision. ”

“ Phillipe, I’m very sorry that your family lost so much; not just property, but your hopes and dreams as well. ” I held his arm as he gazed across the lake. “ Where are your parents now? ”

“ My father became a leader of the Peasant Revolt and died in one of the many uprisings waged against the French government. I’d been at sea for two long years before I finally received the devastating news and immediately sailed back to France, searching high and low for my mother and sister, but I never found them. ” He pulled an unusual handkerchief from his pocket and wiped away the tears that fell from his eyes as he remembered.

“ I didn’t mean to make you feel bad. ” I gave him a comforting hug.

“ Thank you for that my Sweet Little Mermaid. ” The corners of his mouth lifted and the afternoon returned to its former state. “ You’re a wonderful young woman with a heart of gold. ”

“ Phillipe, the design on your handkerchief is quite unique. ”

He showed me the whole picture embroidered on the white background.

“ This is Poseidon, god of the sea and of mariners. ” The god hovered in the

heavens, looking down on a split picture of two ships; one with blue sky and sunshine, the other in raging storm-clouds. “ Depending on his mood, he sends fair weather or foul. ” He gathered my hand in his.

“ The truth of the matter is that your Uncle gifted me with this when I became his First Mate onboard Goddess of the Sea. In all my years sailing with him, we’ve been blessed with Poseidon’s favor on the ocean. ” Phillipe spoke directly to my heart. “ In the short time we’ve known each other, you’ve brightened my days with your inquisitive mind and dazzling smile. ” He pointed in the direction of the lake. “ Do you think I could do justice to a pair of canoe oars, what with me being a sailor on the seven seas? ”

I looked him up and down in mock seriousness. “ You, Sir, will do quite nicely, although no one’s ever asked me to go canoeing. ”

“ Then let me say I feel honored in being the first to glide you across the smoothness of Three Graces Lake. ” Phillipe tossed a coin to the man in charge of the canoe rentals and then held my hand as I balanced myself into a sitting position. He shoved us off and with little effort skimmed towards the middle of the lake, expertly paddling around the other canoeists.

We landed on the far side of the lake in a small shaded clearing, then strolled to the end of a short wooden dock which was perfect for anyone wishing to catch fish for lunch or dinner. The summertime sky was blue and sported white puffy clouds that formed a pleasing canopy overhead.

Phillipe plopped down and removed his shoes and stockings, then stuck his feet into the dark water. “ Join me, my Mermaid Desiree’ . ”

“ I hope you’re not intending for me to finish walking the plank into the lake? ” I giggled.

He patted the place beside him. “ There’s no need to be afraid; I promise not to throw you in! ” A lopsided grin split his face.

I settled myself next to him and slipped off my shoes, then rolled down the short stockings that I wore in place of long pantaloons and layer upon layer of petticoats. The minute my feet touched the cool liquid, my toes curled. “ Phillipe, is there a legend behind the Three Graces? ”

He spoke with no emotion in his voice. “ The First Grace is that of Our

Lord, who died for our sins here on earth, in order that we may go to our eternal reward in Heaven. The second Grace is that of the Church, leading the spiritual realm here on earth. And the third Grace is that of the King, leader of the earth's physical realm. All of that means less than nothing now, but when I was a young lad the lake was named Farrah Rose. ”

“ Phillipe, tell me the story of Farrah Rose. ”

“ Just for you, Sweet Desiree’ . ” He continued with a faraway look in his eyes...

“ Once upon a time in a land of complete sadness, an evil gypsy woman cast her spell of discontent on two young lovers; Jacques O’Spades and Farrah Rose. In their bewitched state of being, it was decreed that they’d be kept apart for many passing moons, bereft boy and lonely lass. His soul lived in the bleak grey cold of frozen wintertime, until he could find his one true love. The girl was turned into a beautiful rose with petals pink and fair, but she was only allowed to bloom once a year on the first full day of sunny spring, releasing the warm fragrance of her perfume to melt his heart. ”

He paused for a brief moment to watch a pair of bluebirds chatting to each other about the day’s events. “ Jacques became a lifelong wanderer; in every town and city he entered, face so sad and bones so weary, he asked, ‘Have you seen my one true love?’ The city folk and townsfolk had but one collective answer, ‘No, we haven’t seen your Farrah Rose, but true love’s path is never simple, never easy.’ Now our friend Jacques walked in deep green valleys and on top of purple mountain majesties; throughout the summer, autumn, winter, and springtime, a tinkling voice carried on the ever-changing wind gave him faith and hope.

‘One spring day you shall find me
Your lovely Rose, so fair and pink
The smell of my perfumed petals
will make you feel intoxicated,
even though it is not wine
that you will drink.’

“ I could listen to you talk about Rose and Jacques forever. ” I dipped my hand in the lake, scooped up some water and threw it at Phillipe, then smiled. “ Just think of it as one small kiss from your Little Mermaid. ”

“ I suppose I had that coming, but would rather settle for a kiss from you,

Desiree'. ” I quickly pecked his cheek, then laced his fingers with mine.
“ Thank you, Sweet One. Now I'll finish my story, for the hour is growing late. After many years of searching, Jacques approached a snowcapped mountaintop, the highest he would ever climb. A single rose bush, adorned with one rare fragrant bud grew on an outcropping of granite. The last of tiny embers hidden deep within his love-starved heart leapt into eternal flames with a mighty roar. The most beautiful of flowers, his pleasing to the eye Farrah Rose, blossomed right before him as he gently kissed the pinkness of her perfumed petals. The evil spell was broken, and they held each other tight. The tears of joy they cried together formed this lake of love. ” Phillipe gazed deep into my eyes as he told the moral of the story.
“ There are times when we must go to the ends of the earth to find the best of loves. ”

“ All I know about love is the way I feel about Uncle Joshua. He's been more of a father to me than my own father has ever been. I know absolutely nothing when it comes to boys or men, though. ” I shrugged my shoulders.
“ They are a confusing lot. ”

Phillipe laughed. “ I'd venture to say that most men feel that way about the women they know, as well. ”

“ Do you really believe that true love comes to each of us, Phillipe? ” My experiences had taught me that love was a destroyer, giving heartache and sorrow instead of lifelong happiness.

“ Yes, Desiree', but love isn't limited to intimate relationships between a man and a woman. We love each other as good friends, having no expectations except in wanting the other person to be happy and fulfilled in their lives. ”

“ Phillipe, I do cherish what we have. ” We pulled on our stockings and shoes, then ran back to the canoe. He sang a little song as he rowed...

“ ‘Dip, dip, and swing the paddle
Flashing like a silver fish
In the dazzling sun it sparkles
Dip, dip and swing the paddle.’ ”

We ran aground just as the sun was setting and made it back to Madame

Chaumont's before twilight. I thought it strange that all the shutters were closed on such a warm night until the evening breeze carried frenzied sounds of crowds screaming and yelling. "I was beginning to worry about the two of you." Uncle Joshua ushered me into the front hallway.

"There's no need to worry, my Little Mermaid; you'll be safe here." Phillipe withdrew a bright red handkerchief from his coat pocket; it had white initials stitched into the middle of a dark blue nautical design. "Please keep this to remember me by." I never got to thank him for his gift, but placed it within the pages of his poetry book.

"Do you still have your silver pistol, Phillipe?"

"Aye, aye, Captain." Phillipe's carriage pulled to the curb, and he climbed up top with the driver. "You know which route to take." Rounding the corner, they moved quickly out of sight.

Uncle Joshua locked the door behind us. "I cannot in good conscience allow you or Annelle to stay here in Paris one more day. We're leaving early in the morning."

"Does this mean I won't get a chance to officially say good-bye to Phillipe?" Tears of sadness sprang to my eyes and I sighed deeply.

"Desiree', you truly didn't listen to the dinner table conversation we had, did you? Phillipe agreed that we should leave as soon as possible." He held my hand. "Be glad for the time you had with him today." He kissed my forehead and embraced me in his strong arms. "Desiree', Annelle's waiting for you in your room."

I slowly walked upstairs, feeling disheartened. Annelle had set a small tray of apples and sliced cheese next to our bed to snack on. "Desiree', why are you so sad? Is there anything I can do to cheer you up?"

"Annelle, Phillipe and I have become good friends, and I shall dearly miss him." I sat in front of the dresser and tried to eat, but my stomach was tied in knots.

"Would you like to freshen up?" I thought she'd call the servant girl, but Annelle was the one who helped me out of my dress and undergarments and

washed me with lavender soap and warm water. When I was clean as a daisy, she helped me on with my nightgown and I sat down in front of the mirror. “ Cousin Desiree’, I was hoping that you and I could become good friends so you’ll never have to feel lonely again. ” Annelle smiled at my reflection and I hugged her there on the spot. “ Would you consent to letting me brush your hair for you? ” I nodded yes. She removed the pins and my curls fell in black waves to my waist.

“ Your hair is so soft and silky. ” The brush moved with no effort, and as Annelle smoothed with her other hand, her motions calmed and relaxed me.

" All my life I’ve prayed for someone near my own age to confide in and talk to, Annelle. ” I was content for a brief moment, but thoughts of the Chapel at Montague Cathedral crept into my mind and I clinched my teeth.

“ Have I pulled your hair too hard, Desiree’? ”

“ No, Annelle. I was just wondering if you knew anything about Montague Cathedral and Father Quimper. We stopped there for a visit before coming to Paris. ” I really wanted to ask about the Chapel, but would wait to see what she told me.

“ Many of the stories I’ve heard are pure flights of fancy, told by those who wish to discredit the Church and all she stands for. ”

“ If you tell me some of the stories, I might fall asleep faster. ” I wanted to learn as much as possible.

“ They say the Chapel was built on consecrated ground, dedicated to a hideous god of unknown regions who wears a hooded robe to hide his facial features. The priests worship the name of Blaec Toth Snaca; he has the body of a man and the head of a snake with sharp fangs and red eyes that glow in the dark. ” She shuddered in fright. “ He’s cruel and bloodthirsty, personifying the evil intentions of dark wickedness, ruling the forces of chaos and confusion. ”

“ That’s quite some story, Annelle. Do you believe it? ” In my heart of hearts I knew I did.

“ Desiree’, there are many things that I don’t understand or wish to believe. I’ve met Father Quimper on a few occasions and he seemed like a caring priest, deeply devoted to his church and God. It’s doubtful he would allow evil practices to go on there. ” She fluffed my hair. “ It’s time for us to rest, as morning comes with haste. ”

As much as I wanted to tell her about my run-in with the ungodly priest, I didn’t want Annelle to think I was a schoolgirl ninny, frightened by my own shadow. We climbed into the soft bed. “ Good night, Cousin Annelle. Pleasant dreams for you this evening. ” I squeezed her hand and drifted off to sleep.

“ Wake up, sleepyhead. ” Annelle parted the curtains for early morning sunlight to enter our room. ” I gave you an extra thirty minutes to rest, but we only have one hour to prepare for departure. Father wished to leave earlier, but traveling these city streets in darkness is dangerous. ” She placed a small platter of biscuits and strawberries on the dresser and set a jug of fresh milk for us to drink beside it.

I stretched and yawned as Annelle held up a dress in front of my eyes. “ Father specifically bought this traveling gown for you to wear today, Desiree’. ” It was deep apricot in color; the round collared neckline was accented with white lace trim and the high waistline dipped to a ‘V’ at the junction of the pleated belling skirt. The long sleeves were curved at the elbow and decorated with two horizontal rows of white lace at the wrist. “ Father says you must make a good impression on Mother when you meet her this afternoon. ”

Although Aunt Madeliane was my mother’s twin sister, I rarely heard her name mentioned in our house. “ What’s she like, Annelle? ”

“ She’s both headmistress and owner of the school you’ll be attending, but she plays no favorites. ” Annelle's laugh was hearty. “ At least she never made an exception in my case! ” She gazed at me with a critical eye, but her words were perfect. “ Desiree’, she’ll love you as much as Father and I do. ”

Uncle Joshua waited for us by the carriage. “ I’ve said my good-byes, and I trust both of you have as well. ” He opened the door for Annelle and me, then took a seat up top, next to the driver. We traveled in an easterly direction and were soon out of Paris.

Misty fog obscured the scenery as dampness swirled through and around the oak and pine trees. I needed a diversion when sad thoughts of missing Phillippe intruded on the silence. “ Cousin Annelle, please tell me about the city we're going to? ”

Her eyes gleamed with joy. “ I've been away for three years, but will tell you about the city named Nancy, located in the Lorraine District. I grew up there, but was sent to Paris just before the war broke out. ”

“ Nancy, France. It does have a certain ring to it. ” I grinned.

“ Nancy was fortified in the 12th century and became the capital of the Dukes of Lorraine. In 1477, Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, was defeated and killed by Swiss forces, while trying his best to capture the town. During the 16th century the small town prospered and Charles the Great, Duke of Lorraine and the Bar, founded a separate new town, the Ville-Neuve, which was captured by the French in 1633 and restored to the Lorraine Dukes after the Treaty of Rijswijk in 1697. Louis XV granted Nancy and the duchy of Lorraine to his father-in-law, Stanislaw I, after he lost the Polish crown in 1735 as the result of the War of the Polish Succession. He made Nancy one of the most splendid cities in Europe. Stanislaw died in 1766 and the city became part of France again. It wasn't that long ago that war broke out with Prussia, but thankfully it's over and done with. ”

“ Men and their wars. ” I glanced out the window as fat raindrops started to fall. “ There's so much I don't understand about the male of our species. ”

“ You're in good company, Desiree'. I think it all started with Adam and Eve, and has continued down through the centuries. ” I yawned and Annelle said, “ Once you settle into our home, you'll be able to get the rest which comes with comfort and loving care. ”

“ Thank you, Annelle, but first I'd ask a favor. ” I smiled in my heart and held her hand in mine. “ Would you consent to becoming my blood sister? ”

“ Desiree', I'd be more than honored to have you as my sister, but how do we accomplish that feat? ” Annelle smoothed my hair and hummed a little melody.

“ It’s a very simple process. First of all we make a slight cut on our wrists, rubbing them together to mingle our life forces, then as true-blooded sisters, we swear a lifelong oath of loyalty and love to each other. ” Annelle would take the place of Bethanie as my sister.

I’d thought of everything in case she said yes and removed a silver handled letter opener from my pocket. When she turned her hand over, I did a double-take; Annelle had a heart-shaped birthmark on her right wrist.

“ Desiree’, don’t be alarmed; that mark has been carried down through many generations on my father’s side of the family and is considered a sign of fated good fortune and the best of luck. ”

“ We’ve both been blessed, Annelle. ” She closely inspected a pigmented mirror image on my right wrist, then I drew the letter opener’s sharpened tip across her birth marked flesh. A thin streak of red liquid flowed from her skin. She did the same with my right wrist and we co-mingled our blood. “ I swear on all that I hold holy, that you’ll always be my true sister in this life and beyond. ” Annelle swore the same as me, and we sealed our oath with the kiss of sisterhood to complete the ceremony. All my pressing burdens were lifted and I was no longer alone or afraid of my new life in France.

“ Annelle, we are now sisters in heart, soul, and blood, allowed to share what we think and feel, without worrying about betrayal; truth and honesty between sisters shows the highest form of love. ”

“ Lay your head down and sleep for the duration of the trip, Sister Desiree’; I’ll always love and protect you. ” I snuggled close to Annelle, drinking in the warmth and comfort, the human touch I’d missed my entire life.

I woke when the horses came to a sudden stop in front of the Meurthe Inn.

“ Desiree’, we’ve arrived on the outskirts of Nancy. ” Uncle Joshua opened the carriage door to a gloomy day. I wondered how much time had passed as my stomach growled for some real food.

Annelle said, “ School is still in session and that’s why you and Father are meeting Mother in town. ” She gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, then handed me white gloves, which were a necessary requirement for all upstanding young ladies. Annelle waved good-bye. “ I’ll see you and Father and Mother later this evening. ”

Uncle Joshua offered me his arm and at the top of the steps the owner greeted us. “ Monsieur DuMond, what is your pleasure today? ”

“ We’re meeting Madame DuMond for the mid-afternoon meal. ”

“ This way, please. She’s been expecting you. ” A beautiful lady with auburn hair and aristocratic features was seated at a private table, positioned far from the noise of the main dining area. After she rose, Uncle Joshua kissed her on the cheek. “ Desiree’, this is your Aunt, Madeliane Whitney DuMond. ” She hugged me to her breast and I was reminded of Annelle, as pure love flowed from her arms into my heart.

“ Aunt Madeliane, thank you for allowing me to stay with you and Uncle Joshua. I hope that I’ll fit into your life and do well in school. ” I smiled.

“ Desiree’, I won’t make any schoolwork allowances for you, but my students all consider me to be fair-minded. Now to matters at hand; are you hungry? ” I nodded yes. “ In that case, may I suggest the most wonderful meal that’s served here? ” Aunt Madeliane spoke French to the waiter who hovered nearby. The entrée’ was onion soup au gratin, followed by the main course of Sea Fricassee’ on thinly shredded potatoes, accompanied by side dishes of green beans and carrots.

I was famished and ate everything on my plate, along with crusty oven-fresh bread. I drank my usual milk and my Aunt and Uncle shared a fine Burgundy wine. Over dessert of glazed pears and apples they discussed details of pre-war life and the restored peace within the Lorraine region. I didn’t interrupt as I wanted to learn about the place I’d call home for the next two years. Uncle Joshua glanced at his pocket watch. “ My Dear Wife, Annelle, Desiree’ and I shall await the pleasure of your company later this evening. ” They strolled across the street to the Nancy School for Girls in the cool rain-freshened air.

The carriage driver returned to pick us up and I fidgeted in my seat, anxious and impatient to arrive at DuMond House. Early evening had descended and we were welcomed to a long curving driveway lit with bright lanterns and windows sparkling with candle light.

Uncle Joshua ushered us into the foyer, which also served as a cloak and boot room. There were pegs across both walls and recessed areas for wet,

muddy shoes. He opened double doors to the left, and I advanced into a most beautiful and unique drawing room, my uncle's haven from the world at large. The flooring warmly glowed in geometric-patterned parquet. A wooden wall railing was midway between the ceiling and floor and the bottom half was wallpapered in wide segments of slate blue, contrasting with smaller stripings of bright red and white. The top portion was clean white, setting off the many pictures and portraits adorning it. My eyes focused on an oil painting. "Uncle Joshua, this clippership looks like the Goddess of the Sea."

"It is, Desiree'. My good friend, J.E. Buttersworth surprised me with it on my 50th birthday; a gift of salt kissed ocean on dry land." His fingers lovingly rubbed the gilded frame, then he turned to me. "Welcome to your new home, Desiree'. Whenever I get homesick for this lovely lady, I'll have your beautiful face to remind me of the pleasant memories we created aboard her."

The furnishings were homey and comfortable with authentic ship lanterns lighting the room. A huge secretary in the corner contained all of Uncle's papers, books, and writings. Surrounding the square cherry wood table were cloth-covered cushioned chairs that matched the slate blue of the walls, their curved legs inlaid with ebonized dolphin designs.

The room was large enough to house a spectacular grand piano and the rosewood gleamed and shone in polished splendor as I sat down to play a short melody. "I remember when my mother brought the keys to life."

"Yes, Desiree', she was always lost in her music, just as you were right now." Uncle Joshua's smile was filled with sorrow, but he kept his composure. "Now I have the three loveliest ladies in all of France to bring music and laughter to home and hearth."

Annelle and Aunt Madeliane stood in the doorway and clapped their hands. "Desiree', I see that musical talent runs in both our families, so the classics will be added to your studies, as well." Uncle Joshua went to his wife and hugged her tightly.

I ran to Annelle and she enfolded me in her outstretched arms. "To be at home with the people I love most in this world is a dream come true." Peace and contentment firmly entrenched themselves in my heart.

“ Annelle, is the surprise ready? ” Uncle Joshua’s hazel eyes twinkled.

“ Yes, Father. ” Annelle grabbed my hand and we bounded upstairs, stopping at the 3rd door on the left. “ Close your eyes, then tell me what you think of your bedroom. ”

Annelle opened the door and I would swear before a judge and jury that a lovely French garden greeted me; it was an exact replica of my bedroom in Springfield. Climbing red roses on a creamy white trellis papered the walls and stretched across the ceiling, giving the appearance of a rose arbor in full bloom. The floor was highly polished oak, the color of freshly turned earth, and the bedside area rug matched the bedspread and window curtains of periwinkle blue, reminding me of the sky on a clear day. In the corner was a mirrored cherry wood armoire to hold all my dresses, stenciled with butterflies of gold, orange, and red. The small writing desk would come in handy for my schoolwork, but in no way would I use it to write to my Father or Bethanie.

My family stood in the doorway, all smiling at the pleasure written on my face and with joy in my heart I ran to them. “ I’ve never felt this kind of love and happiness before; thank you so much for this grand surprise. ”

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Uncle Joshua handed me a small white box tied with a red satin ribbon. “ This belonged to your mother and I’m sure she’d want you to have it, Desiree’ . ” Nestled inside was a pure black amulet, shaped like a flat teardrop, hanging from a pure gold bracelet.

Annelle fastened it around my wrist and I gazed into the black mirrored surface; my face stared back and I smiled. “ Uncle, you’ve made me feel like a member of your family from the very beginning. ” I never thought to question him about how he’d come to be keeper of this piece of jewelry that belonged to my mother. I was just happy to have a memento.

Uncle Joshua glanced at his pocket watch. “ The hour is growing late, Ladies. It’s time to sleep, and dream of pleasant things. ”

I said goodnight to each of them, and my door was closed, but only minutes later a soft rapping startled me. “ Who is it? ”

“ Annelle, Desiree’. May I come in for a while? ”

“ Of course you can. You’re always welcome to visit me anytime of the day or night. ” I patted the bed. “ Sit beside me, Sister. ” She seated herself and I took her hand in mine, wanting to make sure I hadn’t been mistaken when I saw the marking there. “ Does your wrist hurt where I cut it this morning? ”

“ No, I feel fine. ” She sighed. “ I wished for a sister all my life, but there have been no other children for my mother and father. ” She had tears in her eyes.

I wiped them away with the handkerchief Phillipe had given to me as a keepsake. “ There are times when having a sister is the worst thing that can happen to a girl. ” Annelle drew in her breath. “ And then there are the times when having a sister, such as you, can make all the difference in the world. ” Her lips curved into a beautiful smile. “ Bethanie and I were never close, and after my mother died it was like I didn’t exist for her or my father, so I understand your feelings of loneliness. ”

“ Desiree’, I promise to never hurt you. ”

“ Annelle, do you have a boyfriend? ”

“ That was a quick change of subject, but yes, I do. Reven Aleanse is a very handsome man with brown curly hair and deep blue eyes. We’re to be married in 2 years, after he finishes his latest sea voyage. ”

“ It doesn’t surprise me in the least that you’d fall in love and marry a man of the sea like your father. ” I thought back to being on the Atlantic Ocean with Uncle Joshua and Phillipe. “ Have you ever sailed on a tall ship? ”

“ Never, but Mother and I are sailing to New York to buy my wedding trousseau and meet Reven’s family next September. ”

“ Annelle, how do you know when you truly love another person, a special someone that you want to marry and be with the rest of your life? ”

“ When your very heart says it’s the truth, and you feel the comfort and companionship of your soul touching his. ” I felt lost within myself. “ True love will find you when least expected, Desiree’. How old are you, Sister? ”

“ I’m 16, but will turn 17 in October. ”

Annelle touched my cheek. “ I didn’t meet Reven until I was 18 and now I’m almost 20. ”

“ I don’t want my circumstances to change, but stay as they are right now. ”

“ Desiree’, the bonds we’ve forged as sisters will last all our lives. Come, I’ll help you get ready for bed. ” I stood up and she helped me undress and slip into my nightgown. “ Would you like for me to brush your tresses again? ”

“ Yes, Annelle. ” As the comb glided through my hair, her gentle touch spoke volumes of love. “ Sister Annelle, you’re so fortunate to have your mother with you. Mine has been dead going on 7 years now. ” I shook my head. “ Having a nanny or governess is no kind of replacement, that much I can tell you. ”

“ I’ll be your remedy and cure, Desiree’. As long as you live under this roof, you’ll receive all the loving care that you need and deserve. ” Dame Fortune had smiled on this portion of my life and I was lucky to be with a loving family, no matter how long or short the duration.

She finished, then whispered, “ Lay your head on my lap and drift off to sleep. ” I woke up as bright sunlight streamed through the sparkling glass panes above the window seat, a perfect spot for reading, thinking, or just plain old daydreaming. I unsnuggled myself from the cover’s warmth, then ran over and knelt on the springy cushions so I could drink in the outside scenery. There were weeping redwoods, yellow poplars, cedars, and oak trees in abundance that lent shade to green manicured lawns, while boxwood hedges separated many smaller areas of graceful garden flowers. My eyes were drawn to bright glitters of reflected light as water plumed into the air, then cascaded from a 3-tiered fountain that was situated in the exact middle of two heart-shaped rows of intertwining brilliant red roses and pure white lilies.

The door flew open and Annelle came over to the window seat. “ Desiree’, I’ve spent many a happy hour in our knot garden. ” She went to the armoire and picked out a simple dress for me to wear. “ Mother says it’s time to come eat breakfast. Our chef’s specialty this morning is Quiche Lorraine, made with eggs, cream and small pieces of bacon, shallots, and tomatoes. This meal will melt in your mouth and after we eat, we can spend the rest of the morning walking the grounds. ”

I laughed in excitement as we raced downstairs to the dining room. The table was grandly set with gilt-edged black opaque plates engraved with gold crescent moons in the center. Polished silverware shone and milk glasses bore a panoramic view of Paris proper. Up against the wall was a buffet, displaying Bohemian glassware and Vienna porcelain pieces, but my eyes lingered on two silvered rose glass lamps. I was positive they would glow in brilliant sunrise colors when they were lit.

Uncle Joshua and Aunt Madeliane were just finishing coffee when we reached the table. “ Annelle, your father and I are going into the city around 2 o’clock this afternoon as we have business matters that need our attention. Perhaps you girls would like to go as well? ” She waited for an answer.

“ Desiree’, please say yes. There won’t be much time for city visits after you start school. ” Annelle bubbled over with enthusiasm.

“ Yes, yes, yes, I want to go with you. ” I hugged Annelle and anticipated all the sights I’d see.

“ Then it’s settled. After breakfast you’re free until 1pm. If the two of you aren’t ready to leave at that time, you’ll both be left at home. ” Uncle Joshua sounded stern, but his eyes twinkled in undisguised merriment. “ Come Madeliane. ” He proffered his arm and they left us to our own devices.

We ate till we were filled with delicious food, then Annelle pushed her chair back from the table and opened the glass-paned double-doors. “ Desiree’, the world awaits our presence. ” Fleet of girlish foot we ran like the wind to the knot garden and strolled through the flowered areas on the main path under the fat yellow sun. Dappled light filtered through many various trees, giving us shade from the day’s heat. The scent of roses and lilies filled my nostrils as Annelle chose a walkway that meandered towards the middle of the garden. We passed benches where one could sit and contemplate in quiet

solitude, then walked across an arched wooden bridge which was situated above a small babbling brook that flowed through the estate. Here and there we stopped to stare at statues of whimsical animals and dour deities.

The 3-tiered fountain loomed in majestic proportions and the cooling liquid splattered us in sprinkling gaiety. Annelle and I removed our shoes and rolled off our stockings, then stuck our feet in the water. “ Desiree’, this is the heartbeat of the knot garden; the story goes that for many years the roses and lilies were kept far apart from each other and this fountain was filled by their sad and lonely tears. One day the Great Gardener, Himself, intertwined these particular flowers and their blending became an eternal movement in vibrant cascades of joy and love. ” She guided my hands into the dripping liquid. “ Splash some water on your face and true love will come to you today or so the legend goes. ” She giggled as I dabbed just a bit on my forehead. “ That won’t do the trick, Sister. ” Annelle cupped her hands and threw more than enough water in my direction to soak my hair and dress. I screamed in delight and we commenced to having a water war!

We finally called a truce. “ Annelle, you look liked a drowned rat, and I suppose I do as well. ” We sat in the sun and dried off, the silence comfortable between us.

“ Desiree’, we’d best be returning to the main house as it will take a bit of time to clean up and get ready to go to town with Mother and Father. ” I followed her down the winding paths, trying to commit to memory the way we went.

Crossing the lawn, we saw a young man deep in conversation with Uncle Joshua. There was no way to enter the house without being seen, and they both stared intently at us. Uncle Joshua cleared his throat, but we didn’t stop for an introduction and I felt their eyes on the back of my neck as we made a hasty retreat inside to our rooms. Annelle stopped in front of my door and drew in a deep breath before she spoke. “ Desiree’, I do believe the legend has worked; I could see that young man was smitten with you. ”

“ You mean he wants to be friends with a girl who looks like a guttersnipe? ” Gales of laughter came from both of us. “ That’s very doubtful, Annelle. He probably thought we were the serving girls, finishing the morning’s wash. ”

“ I’m sure that Father told him who we are, but that won’t make any difference. Once your studies begin, we’ll have little time for socializing until Christmas. ” She waved her hand at me. “ I bet I’ll make it downstairs before you do, Desiree’! ” Annelle was gone in an instant.

A servant girl helped me out of my partially wet clothes, and I washed quickly with her assistance. The dress I chose to wear was green as pine trees with pale ivy leaves and red roses stitched on the white cotton collar. “ Miss Desiree’, this gown brings out the color of your eyes. ” I gazed into the mirror as she brushed my hair out in black waves, thinking that this was the image the young man with Uncle Joshua should have seen.

A knock came at my door. “ Are you ready yet, Desiree’? ” Aunt Madeliane peeked in. “ Dearest Niece, you remind me so much of your mother. ” She hugged me, then said, “ Annelle and your Uncle are waiting downstairs for us. ”

After we were seated inside the carriage, Annelle leaned over and whispered, “ Every time I make plans to go to the gardens, the servant girls lay out my clothes and keep a lookout for my return. ” My eyes misted over with the love I felt for her.

Uncle Joshua gave me a short history lesson on the road to Nancy. “ With the Meurthe River ford being used by man and animal alike, and the neighboring Forest of Hays abounding in game, the negotiable road from north to south and the salt trail from east to west probably led Duke Gerard to build the fortified town called Nanciaccum. Religious orders, such as that of Notre Dame de Molesme, a marketplace and a small city court with a structured government quickly contributed to the expansion of Nancy into what you see today. ”

Annelle and I were let out near the lead Fountain of Neptune on Stanislas Square. She showed me the city hall which had its facade ornamented with the Duke’s and the town’s coat of arms, while on the other side was the Grand Hotel. As we walked by, the same young man who had been with Uncle Joshua earlier in the day came out of the entrance, almost knocking us down in his haste to get to his carriage. “ Pardon me, Ladies. ”

“ It’s not customary for proper young women to speak to men they haven’t been formally introduced to. ” Annelle grabbed my hand and we ran down

the street, laughing and giggling as we rounded the corner.

“ I know of a place that should intrigue you, Cousin. Any rumors that you might have heard about a certain cathedral housing the tombs of Dukes and Cardinals in its basement are true. ” We walked briskly to the outskirts of town and entered the church she had spoken of. The inner coolness was inviting and at the end of the wide center aisle, the lit altar candles flickered. Annelle laid a coin in the offering box and picked up two unlit candles.

“ Quickly light your candle and follow me. ” She pushed on a short recessed door near the back wall, then ducked her head. “ It’s a sacrilege for females to visit the tombs, but I’ve never been caught. ” I was scared, but thrilled to the bone that Annelle considered me worthy of her trust as we made our way deeper into the mazed catacombs. “ We’re almost there. ” We snuck by many room openings, then made a right turn that branched off into a huge hall. Dozens of gold and brass caskets were shaped like sphinxes with massive lion’s paws, and carved on their lids were intricate snake designs.

“ What do these symbols mean, Annelle? ” They were quite beautiful and my curiosity was aroused.

“ I have no idea, Desiree’ . ” As soon as she uttered the words, male voices drifted towards us and we hid in a small alcove with our backs pressed hard against the wall, praying for invisibility.

Crimson robed monks filed past one by one, forming a circle as they chanted unknown phrases that were foreign to my ears and mind. One monk raised his hands for silence, then separated himself from the group. “ My Brothers, the time is close at hand. Once the full moon rises, the symbolic offering shall be readied for us. ”

“ Ohhm, ” was their collective response.

The only one to remove his cowl was their leader and I would swear on the Holy Bible that he was the same monk I’d seen earlier at Montague Cathedral. “ I see a pleasing vision; the desired fulfillment and culmination of treacherous deeds that will soon come to their rightful conclusion. ” He turned in our direction and stared straight at me.

My heart and knees trembled with unspeakable fear long after the monks left. My voice and courage finally returned. “ Annelle, we must leave this

demon place before we're presented as human sacrifices. " We ran like frightened animals, until we reached the door that led to the main sanctuary, then knelt in front of the altar, breathing heavily. Annelle made the sign of the cross, but I knew deep within my soul that I was beyond God's help; I pondered a future which had been signed and sealed, but had yet to be delivered. Church parishioners came to pray and we followed a group of older ladies out into blessed daylight, then ran back to Stanislas Square and the Fountain of Neptune.

We sat on the edge, dangling our feet in the water and Annelle said, " Tell me what you meant back there in the catacombs. "

" I recognized that monk who stood apart from the others; he was the same man I saw at Montague Chapel. " Even though the sun beat down mercilessly, I shivered, feeling terror flow ripe in my veins. " I felt the evil emanating from his body. "

Annelle laughed. " Desiree', I do believe that you've read too many morbid tales, and they've gotten your imagination working in a negative way. Consider today as your last big adventure before school starts. " She held my hand in a sisterly fashion. " Those holy men were just talking of the spiritual realms here on earth and in heaven above. They meant no harm, although I'm sure they would have had the local Cardinal bar us from attending church for a month or so. " She shrugged her shoulders. " The chapel at home would be put to good use, so all in all it wouldn't matter. "

My Aunt and Uncle's carriage pulled up beside us. " Climb in, girls; the hour grows late and we must be on our way home for the evening meal. " The passing days flew swiftly by and I slowly dismissed everything that had transpired as I relaxed in the calm loving surroundings of life with my new family.

A consistent daily life brought out the best in me. I studied hard and got good grades, not in order to please my father, but to show respect and love for myself. I was not even displeased when Uncle Joshua announced that holiday outings to Paris would be put on hold until the political unrest eased and it would be safe to visit that beautiful city and see Phillippe once again.

Time slipped by unnoticed until the dreaded Monday morning of September 16th, 1875, finally arrived. Annelle and Aunt Madeliane were packed and ready to set sail for America in order to shop for Annelle's wedding trousseau and meet Reven's family. My heart was breaking, but I didn't have the right to intrude on Annelle's happiness. "Desiree', we'll return in April and then your time will be occupied with helping me plan my wedding; I've chosen you to be my maid of honor." To have my sister think so much of me; I smiled as tears of happiness, then sadness streamed down my face. "After I'm married, we'll throw many fine parties and introduce you to French society, ultimately finding you a suitable husband who'll appreciate your sweet nature."

Aunt Madeliane kissed and hugged Uncle Joshua and me, and then he helped them into his best private carriage, along with a trusted male servant. When they were out of sight we walked through the front door. "Desiree', is there anything special you'd like Cook to make for supper?"

"No, Uncle Joshua." Loneliness shrouded me in gloom. "I'm going to miss both of them so much."

He hugged me tightly, smelling of pipe tobacco and spices, then spoke matter-of-factly. "Desiree', even though your Aunt Madeliane has closed her school and won't return until spring, you must continue with lessons."

"Yes, Uncle." I had no idea how I'd begin to cope with my empty life and sighed deeply.

"Tomorrow morning we're going on a trip to Fredericksburg to meet your new tutor. If both of you are agreeable, you'll stay with him and his family until..."

I interrupted him before he could finish. "Uncle, I don't want to leave you. There must be some one here who can teach me." I broke free of his embrace and ran upstairs to my room.

There was a knock on my door. "Desiree', may I come in? It's very important that I speak to you now." Uncle Joshua sat beside me on the bed and I dried my eyes. "Dearest Niece, I'm only doing this for your own good. In 3 weeks time I'll leave to join your Cousin and Aunt in New York and I want to know that you're safe and well taken care of until our

return in April.” He gazed at me with fatherly concern. “And then as God is my witness we’ll welcome you back with open arms to live with us as long as you desire.”

“Uncle, being on good terms with Reven’s family should be all that concerns you now, and I wish to avoid going back to Springfield. My father never made me feel like his daughter and Bethanie always made sure I didn’t fit in.”

“Desiree’, his name is Marcus Canossa, Count of Fredericksburg and I knew his father very well. He’s just finished his studies at the University of Fredericksburg, and is taking over the entire operation of his late father’s winery. I know this is hard, but you’ll have female companionship and the best of everything to groom you for your debut into French society. Although I’ve not met them, your Aunt has told me both the Count’s step-mother and step-sister are lovely ladies.” He stood up. “While we eat supper, the servants will pack your bags for the trip.” I nibbled on apple and cheese slices in the kitchen while Uncle Joshua comforted me with stories of the good times we’d shared as a family during the past year. “You’ve matured into a beautiful young woman, Desiree’. Just remember that the best part of your life lies ahead and not behind you.”

“Uncle Joshua, I guess I can manage as long as I know you won’t be gone forever.”

“I think you’ll be quite happy with Count Marcus and his family, Desiree’.” He winked and his voice boomed with good humor. “Maybe when you return to DuMond House, Annelle and your Aunt can find a royal suitor for your hand.”

I shook my head and giggled. “Uncle, even if that were possible, the only thing my heart desires is to live here my true family.”

“Desiree’, the hour grows late and we must be up early for our journey.” He walked me to my room and kissed my cheek. “None of us knows what the future holds, but everything will work out for the best. Always believe that.” I had a hard time sleeping, as many possibilities danced in my head.

Chapter 18

Before dawn, a knock came at my door. “ Miss Desiree’, your uncle says it’s time to rise. ” The servant girl helped me dress and Uncle Joshua and I left as daylight tinted the horizon.

We made our way eastward through green fields, small villages and fertile farmlands. The horse’s hooves clattered on wooden bridges and I wondered what Count Marcus might look like; would he be a handsome prince or an ugly old troll? And what of his step-mother and step-sister; would their personalities match those in Cinderella’s fairytale? I drifted off to sleep, but woke up to Uncle Joshua’s voice. “ Desiree’, it won’t be long until we arrive at the Count’s home. ”

The bright sunlight disappeared from view as we traveled through a forest of deep dark pine and ancient fir trees. Nestled amongst many cherry trees at the farthest end of the high hillside road was a massive castle; it stood like a proud jewel, mounted on an outcropping of granite rock. Atop each rounded greystone turret, red and white flags flew stiffly in the cool mountain breeze. “ Uncle Joshua, I’ve never seen such a magnificent place. ”

I followed him to the front entrance and he banged the circular brass knocker on the heavy wooden door. “ Good afternoon. ” Her voice was light and airy and her face was angelic in its perfection, framed by long flowing waves of blond hair. “ Welcome to Castle Desiree’. ” Did my ears misunderstand her? “ My name is Sheridan Canossa, step-sister to Marcus Canossa, Count of Fredericksburg. ” Her dark brown eyes lit up as she said his name with unabashed reverence. “ He’ll be returning from the grape arbors shortly. Please come inside. ”

We entered the small foyer. There were four gold-gilded pictures, two on each wall, showing a different scene of the surrounding countryside. One in particular caught my interest and I stopped to get a closer look, then closed my eyes and pictured myself on a real turret, surveying the valleyed land and its central focal point of a sapphire blue lake. I was lost in a reverie of fresh air and sunshine and didn’t recognize the male voice who spoke to me. “ This picture doesn’t do justice to the property. ”

I turned around. The face that went with the voice seemed familiar, but I

couldn't place it. He was handsome, with dark curly hair and black eyes that pierced my soul. "Do I know you?"

"How soon they forget!" His laugh was pure delight and when he kissed the back of my hand, shivers raced down my spine. "Let me properly introduce myself to you. I'm Marcus Canossa, Second Count of Fredericksburg." He bowed deeply. "At your service, Miss Desiree'."

My mind drifted back to the first occasion when I'd seen him at Uncle Joshua's home, then in front of the Grand Hotel in Nancy. "I see you do have some appropriate manners after all!" I pursed my lips.

"So you haven't forgotten our first auspicious meeting. And might I add you're even more beautiful today than the last time I saw you." He grinned in amusement. "Come walk with me." He laced his fingers with mine and led me up winding greystone stairs to the east turret.

On the last step a sudden crosswind gust caught us unawares and my hat loosened, then sailed off across the tree-line and floated into the valley below. My matching pair of pale-green and purple swirled cabochon cut glass hairpins fell to the floor and my hair tumbled down in ringlets and waves. I knelt to pick them up, but Marcus gathered my hands in his. "Let your tresses fly wild and free, like the restless spirit that resides within your soul." He helped me rise and his face drew near to mine, but it was his kiss that startled me most. I wanted to back away, but my feet were frozen in place. "I've wanted to do that since the first time I saw you at your Uncle's house." He saw the shadow of confusion in my eyes.

"Count Marcus, I don't know very much about the ways of men such as yourself. I've never had any kind of serious suitors in my life and the only man who's ever treated me with dignity, love, and respect has been my Uncle Joshua." I needed to formalize a strategy so I wouldn't have to be alone with the Count on future occasions. I turned to leave, but his voice held me spellbound.

"I see that you're a refined young lady in need of gentle nurturing. Please forgive my foolhardy forwardness and tell me about yourself." His smile was contrite, reminding me of a little boy who's been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "Just call me Marcus, if you will." How was I to refuse? I told him of my studies, and how Annelle and I had bonded like sisters.

Tears came unbidden to my eyes as I talked of the sorrow I had felt when she and my Aunt Madeliane had left Nancy to travel to America, and of how much I'd miss my Uncle Joshua. Marcus reached into his trouser pocket and produced an initialed handkerchief which he handed to me. "Are your aunt, uncle and cousin your entire family?"

"As far as I'm concerned, they are." My contempt was real as I spoke of how my father, mother, and sister had treated me, making me feel like the worst of all persons in the world. "This last year is the only time I've ever been surrounded by those who loved and accepted me as I am." I sighed deeply. "For once in my life I had order and stability and now I feel at a loss, being left in the company of strangers who know nothing about me."

Marcus was gentle in his approach. "We must learn to accept and adapt in certain situations; that's how one's maturity is determined." He glanced at his pocket watch. "I'm sure that my family and your uncle probably think you've gotten lost somewhere in Castle Desiree'."

"Is that the name of this castle?"

"Yes, it is, although the original name was Monasterium Damnare; Monastery of the Damned. It had fallen into total disrepair when my father bought and restored it." He gave that bit of news a moment to sink into my mind. "My father was the original Count of Fredericksburg and had untold wealth, handed down from one generation to the next. Gold, silver, jewels, and property came his way as his forefathers conquered nearby kingdoms. My mother was named Desiree', a name which befit her nature." His eyes drifted over me, as if seeing what my temperament was in comparison to his mother's. "This castle was named in her honor on the very day my parents wed." He smiled at his recollections of her. "She was the most beautiful and desirable woman in the entire country with black curling hair, eyes the color of deep lavender, and a lilting voice that dripped with honey. It was love at first sight for both of them. With my father's dark eyes and bold manner, he won my mother's heart and they were married one month to the day after they met."

My Mother wasn't a strong woman and she died giving birth to me." He had a catch in his voice. "While my life was just beginning, hers was ending." Marcus stood at the edge of the parapet, talking to himself. "Even though my father remarried, he never recovered from that day. His heart was

broken and as the years passed by his spirit grew steadily weaker. On my sixteenth birthday he left this earth to be with the love of his life, my mother. ” He looked at me and his countenance brightened. “ I inherited my father’s title, Count of Fredericksburg, and all the responsibilities of our main family business which goes with it. In fact, I’ve just finished my studies at the University of Fredericksburg and am taking full control of the vineyards and grapes used in our winemaking facilities. ”

“ I’m so sorry that you never knew your mother, Marcus. ” His name rolled off my tongue with ease as I realized that his story was one seen through his father’s eyes. The sun threw streaks of lightning off the black amulet that encircled my wrist, and I could swear I saw my mother’s haunted smile instead of my own face in its reflection.

Marcus took my elbow as I began to sway back and forth. “ Is there something wrong, Desiree’? You’re as white as a ghost. ” There was a concealed door to the right of the steps and he opened it to reveal a small cot, two well-worn overstuffed chairs and a round wooden table. “ Lay down, Desiree’ and I’ll send my sister to tend to your needs. ” While he was gone, I thought long and hard about my current state of affairs; my entire life would change in two days when Uncle Joshua returned home, and I couldn’t allow myself to seem weak when I was left with the Count and his family.

“ Marcus told me where you were. ” Sheridan stood in the doorway, a blonde angel haloed against the bright blue sky. I drank the glass of cool liquid she handed me and felt better in a short time. She glanced around the room and frowned. “ You can’t meet my mother looking like a commoner. Where are your hairpins and hat? ”

“ The breeze played a trick on me, and now my bonnet lies somewhere in the valley below. ”

I knew she didn’t believe a word I said as she made a quick bun on the nape of my neck and secured it tightly with plain hairpins from her pocket, then placed a non-descript hat on my head. We took a different route back downstairs and Sheridan pointed out the library and music rooms as we passed by. Upon our entry into the cozy sitting room I noticed the floor was tiled in red, black, and white squares, while logs crackled and blazed in the huge fireplace; two long couches upholstered in deep green velvet were vertically placed to its right and left. A rectangular wooden coffee table

between the couches was covered with a white linen cloth, and set atop with bowls of fruit and plates of cakes and cheeses. The wall to the right was hung with family portraits and the wall to the left was decorated with an Oriental tapestry depicting the many varied colors of the sunrise; layer upon layer from the palest yellow mist at the bottom, until it was blood red at the top.

Marcus sat on the couch to my left and Uncle Joshua and a lady who resembled Sheridan, sat opposite him. Sheridan didn't bother to announce me, but primly sat down next to Marcus. Being a true gentleman, he rose. "I'm glad to see the color has returned to your face." His genuine smile extended itself to my heart as he introduced me to his stepmother. "Rochelle Canossa, this is Joshua's niece, Desiree' Terrance."

"Desiree', it's so nice to finally make your acquaintance." With her blond hair piled on top of her head, Rochelle was the picture of beauty and grace and when she kissed each of my cheeks, her flowering almond perfume overwhelmed my senses. I curtsied in response. "Your Aunt Madeliane has written to me of your loveliness and sweet disposition. Come sit between your uncle and me." I sat close to Uncle Joshua, and he handed me a small plate of dark purple grapes and hard yellow cheese. Rochelle poured hot tea into delicate gold rimmed Wedgwood china cups. "Would you care for lemon, sugar, or cream to go with that?"

I couldn't help myself and laughed out loud, an unredeemable social faux pas. "Just lemon, please."

"What's so amusing, Niece?" Uncle Joshua knitted his eyebrows, probably thinking these people would find me unacceptable and he'd be hard pressed to accommodate me elsewhere on such short notice.

"Yes, do tell." Marcus frowned, but there was a mischievous glint in his eye that said I was with family and not to be afraid of saying what was on my mind.

"My father and sister always said that having lemon juice with my tea lent credence as to why I was such a sour puss." Unbidden tears welled in my eyes and threatened to fall down my cheeks.

Marcus knelt beside me, his voice warm with care. "We're your family

now, Desiree'. ” He gathered my hands in his. “ We’ll never hurt you or give you cause to think we don’t love you. ”

I glanced over his shoulder and saw a dark scowl cross Sheridan’s face, but that disappeared the moment she stood in close proximity to him. “ What Marcus has said is the truth, Desiree’. We can be like sisters who love and encourage each other. ” Her words heralded the light of angels, but her eyes were as black as sin. She wiggled her way in front of Marcus as if to say I was an intruder on the life she was accustomed to. He ended up standing behind her, and not kneeling next to me.

I felt mixed emotions churn inside my heart; for an instant she reminded me of Bethanie, but I gave her the benefit of the doubt when she touched my cheek, then held my hand in hers. “ Thank you, Sheridan. ”

Uncle Joshua moved to the other couch and Sheridan quickly took his seat so I was positioned between her and her mother. Rochelle held my other hand. “ Desiree’, I’d also like to second what Marcus and my daughter have said; if you ever need motherly advice, I’ll always listen with an open heart. ” Heavy discomfit settled in my being as I was unused to so much physical contact by strangers. “ Desiree’, tomorrow Sheridan and I are going to town and shop. Would you like to join us? ” Both ladies turned on their full charm, but all I wanted to do was go outside and breathe in the fresh air.

“ Rochelle, I’m sure that Desiree’ is tired from today’s long journey and needs time to settle in here. ” Sheridan shot daggers at Marcus as he came to my rescue. “ We must also consider the fact that she only has a short time left to spend with her Uncle. ”

“ Marcus, you’re right of course. Later on we’ll show Desiree’ what Fredericksburg has to offer. ” Rochelle stared intently at me as if she was the witch in the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel and I was next in line to be devoured. “ I’ll pick up bolts of cloth in patterns and textures that will suit your coloring, Desiree’. There are many social events on our calendar and you must appear at your very best since there will be numerous eligible young men in attendance. ”

That was a troubling thought as I had no wish to be bothered with members of the male species, especially if they were as forward as Marcus. A picture

of Phillipe entered my mind and I remembered receiving only one note from him in all the time I'd lived with Uncle Joshua in Nancy. He'd written of his studies to be a naval architect and said he was enjoying life in Paris. I was suddenly inspired to write and invite him to visit me at Castle Desiree', when he had holidays from the university. I was sure that Rochelle would send him a special invitation to attend one of the balls and Uncle Joshua could hand deliver my message to Phillipe on his way through Paris. It would be nice to laugh and dance with someone I knew.

“ Rochelle, you're going to have Desiree' believing that she'll be married off before even spending one night in our company. ” Marcus laughed with outright amusement.

I was upset that he had intruded on my plans, bringing me back to the present moment. “ Marcus, I entertain no serious thoughts of becoming involved in a relationship with anyone, let alone being married. ”

“ Think of all the fun and excitement you'd miss out on if you had no contact with the opposite sex, Desiree'. ” He chuckled.

I was in no mood for his banter. “ Sometimes it's best to have peace and solitude in order to discover who and what you are. That's the true way of finding both strength and resourcefulness in life. ” My concentration waned and I began to yawn.

“ You're a wise young lady, Desiree', but I'm sure that you're worn out after the day's trip. I'll show you to your sleeping quarters. ” Before anyone could protest, he grabbed my hand, then turned to face Rochelle. ” Have dinner sent up to her room, please. ” We walked down a long corridor to a winding staircase, making a right turn at the top. I assumed the door he opened led to my room, but was mesmerized by the view from another turret. “ Do you see all the grapes which are fastly ripening on the vines. All that land belongs exclusively to me. I am Master of all you survey, and more. ” He turned my face to his and looked me directly in the eye. “ Can you tell me what's missing from this picture? ”

The arbors stretched for miles in the setting sun. I ventured a guess.
“ Workers? ”

“ You are a delight to my senses, Desiree'. Since the grapes won't be ready

for harvest until next week, tomorrow morning would be a good time for you to accompany me to the fields, and discover for yourself the missing piece.” In the fading twilight I watched the outline of his silhouette; this man was a natural born leader, regal in his bearing.

I certainly didn't want to be left alone with his step-mother and step-sister. “ A first-time visit to the vastness of your grape arbors would thrill me to no end. ”

Stars twinkled in the dusky sky. “ I'll give you no reasons to regret spending time with me, Desiree' . ”

The rising moon bathed the greystone walls in pale light and we walked towards the other side of the turret and passed arched windows that hadn't been visible before. Marcus stopped in front of an unusual door; carved into the wood were intertwining red and white climbing roses. When he opened it, I was greeted with a roaring fire on the left wall which added warmth and blazing brightness to the massive room. On the far side of the fireplace was a huge claw foot tub for bathing. The floor was a tiled rose garden, with the flowers in white and red patterns, while deep green tiles were laid for leaves. The wall coverings were tapestries that featured different types of roses growing in cultivated gardens or running wild and free by river banks or tumbling down mountainsides. The bed was solid rosewood and its white velvet canopy was bordered with deep red rosettes, while its red velvet coverlet was bordered with white rosettes and two soft pink embroidered roses in the middle. Near the right front wall stood a scrollwork case filled with books on various subjects and situated next to it was a matched roll top writing desk with a padded straight-backed chair. The right wall arched into a beautiful sitting area with a red velvet couch and overstuffed chairs, and the small square rosewood table was set with fresh cut white gold-tinged tea-roses and enough supper for an army. On the back wall near the candlelit windows stood a French cherry wood armoire and a matching vanity with a gilded mirror. A stuffed rose-brocade chair sat in front of perfume bottles and jars of powders and lotions and off to their side was a gold brush and comb set. “ I hope this is to your liking, Desiree' . ”

“ Does this mean these are my rooms? ” Marcus nodded yes and I danced around the room, stopping to finger, gaze, admire and smell.

I was thinking that Rochelle and Sheridan wanted to give me a sense of

belonging, but was caught off-guard when Marcus told me that he was the one who had drawn up plans and furnished the quarters to his own exacting specifications and personal likings. I wondered how such a strong man could know the inner workings of a woman's heart?

“ Desiree’, your mind seems to be far away from this present moment. Are you hungry by any chance? ”

“ Not really, Marcus, but I am rather thirsty. ” He smiled as if this was the answer he wanted to hear from my lips.

“ That can be remedied; have a seat and I'll give you a wine lesson. ” There were two fluted glasses and a corked bottle sitting on the table. Marcus poured a small amount into his glass and said, “ Watch. ” He swirled the dark red liquid around, then brought it up to his nose and breathed deeply. “ It's important to breathe the aroma into your lungs, letting its very essence tantalize and tease your senses. ” He lifted the glass to his mouth, took a sip, then closed his eyes and swallowed. “ When you taste a wine for the first time, roll it around on your tongue so the bouquet can spread throughout your mouth and throat, then all the way down to your stomach. ” He grinned. “ Now it's your turn, Desiree’. ” I'd never drunk any spirits, but didn't want him to think of me as a little child. I followed his instructions to the letter, and we spent the rest of the evening tasting different wines from Marcus's private stock. I giggled and laughed and he seemed well-pleased. “ I have one more bottle that we should partake of. ” He filled our glasses to the brim and raised his in a toast. “ You're a true beauty with your hair so black and your cheeks aflame; to your health and happiness here at Castle Desiree’. ”

Marcus finished his in record time and bade me do the same. “ There's a legend behind this *Egri Bikaver* that we are sharing, Desiree’. It's also known as ‘Bull's Blood.’ In 1552, the Eger fortress in Hungary was under attack, and the noble defenders were badly outnumbered. As fighting men of courage are often wont to do, they fortified themselves by drinking their local red wine in large amounts; not taking time to concern themselves with refined table manners, the wine spilled on their shirts during this process. The testing hour came and the would-be conquerors fled after they witnessed the brave defenders running towards them with red liquid running down their chests! They assumed the locals had been drinking bull's blood and would be able to withstand any onslaught. ” We finished the bull's blood, but when I stood up I was in no shape to do any conquering. The floor spun

beneath my feet; Marcus swept me into his arms and gently laid me down on the bed. then kissed my forehead and sang a lullaby as I drifted off to sleep.

‘When the evening’s darkness faintly rises
and the hunter’s moon outshines the sinking sun
Starlight threads the velvet night, pearl-escent prizes
Look upon the daughters of Atlas, Pleiades constellation

Safe I will embrace you, fast within my sheltering arms
Till you my heart awaken with the coo of mourning doves
Beholding love that captivates me with her many charms
Angels filled with Heaven’s peace, add their chorus from above.’

Chapter 19

Pale morning light filtered through the windows and a knock sounded at my door. Marcus didn’t bother to wait for a response from me, but made his way inside as if it were his God-given right. “ I decided it would be best to let you sleep in until my mother and sister left on their shopping spree to Fredericksburg. I was in no mood to listen to their idle chitchat about how unseemly it is for a man to visit a young woman in her rooms, without a female relative or servant being present. ” Marcus glanced at the older woman he had in tow. “ Natalia answers only to me, so if anyone asks, she’s our chaperone while I’m in your quarters. ” When I tried to sit up, my head pounded with every heartbeat and the room spun around in dizzying circles. Marcus couldn’t contain his guffaws. “ Desiree’, last night you led me to believe that drinking wine was part of your daily lifestyle at noon and evening meals, yet here you are, being blessed with your first hangover! ” I blushed red-hot in embarrassment and tears of anger sparkled in my eyes. “ Natalia will help you freshen up; she knows the secret of easing the stomach and head after imbibing too much. I’ll return to collect you shortly. ”

He left me to Natalia’s ministrations. “ I’m not surprised that a man like Count Marcus would want to spend his free time with a beautiful young lady like yourself, Miss Desiree’. One word of caution, though; Marcus is a man who’ll take you at your word and it’s been my experience that dishonesty

always backfires sooner or later. ”

She handed me a glass of minty-sweet white liquid and it wasn't long before I felt like myself again. “ Natalia, I just didn't want the Count to look on me as if I was a young girl with no knowledge of the world's ways. ”

She touched my cheek. “ But you are, and that's what he finds so refreshing. After all, hasn't he accepted the position of being your tutor? ” I shook my head yes, and she continued with motherly love in her voice. “ I've been with the Count since the day he entered this world, and I know him inside-out. He's not only a gracious protector and host, but can be loving, kind, and generous, and no one can surpass his knowledge or astute business acumen when it comes to grapes and wine making. ” Natalia extended her hand and helped me rise, then tsked. “ It's not proper for a young woman of good breeding to sleep in her everyday clothes. ” She frowned, but her eyes flickered with amusement as she walked over to the armoire and looked through my dresses. “ None of these will do if your intentions are to accompany Count Marcus to the fields today; the dust and grime will stain these fine materials. I'll be back in a few moments. ” When she returned I'd removed my shoes and stockings and gathered clean undergarments to wear. Natalia unbuttoned my dress and I stepped out of my slip, corset, and pantaloons, then she soothed my body with a warm lavender scented sponge bath.

The clothes she brought for me to wear were just my size; a long-sleeved floral peasant's blouse in cool colors of sky-blue and pine green dotted with hot splashes of sunshine yellow and russet orange, a fiery-red flared skirt, and sturdy black lace-up boots. She tied a wide-brimmed leather hat attached with red velvet ribbons under my chin. “ This will protect your delicate face. ”

A knock came at the door and Natalia opened it to Uncle Joshua and Marcus. They both looked around as if they didn't recognize me in worker's clothes. “ Uncle Joshua, are you going to the grape arbors with us this morning? ” I laughed at the surprised expression on his face.

“ Niece, you present a charming picture. ” I swirled around in the skirt, then kissed his cheek.

Marcus raised his eyebrow, then looked at Natalia and winked. “ You do

think of everything, and for that I'll always be grateful. " I wondered what he meant by that statement, but had no time to ask as he whisked me out the door and down the stairway to a horse drawn buggy. A picnic basket sat on the floor and Marcus sat opposite Uncle Joshua and me while the driver took a road past the grape arbors. On the far side of the fields was a massive stand of olive trees; we sat in the shade and had a marvelous mid-morning meal of bread, grapes, cheese, and cakes. I drank water from the babbling brook instead of the wine Marcus produced and listened intently as he and Uncle Joshua talked of the soon to be harvest. " These particular grapes have a fungus known as botrytis, a grey rot that can attack and destroy vineyards in damp climates, then spread through entire bunches of grapes with ease. In our case, we've handled the fungus properly and are blessed to call it **Noble Rot**, bringing the harvest itself to glorious fruition. " That seemed a contradiction in terms and I laughed. Marcus frowned as if I was a schoolgirl, daydreaming instead of paying strict attention to his lesson on rotted grapes that could be deemed noble. " In the year 1650, a priest was making wine, but was attacked by a band of Turks. The harvest was delayed and when the monks realized that fungus had grown on some of the grapes, they kept those separate. " He took a sip of wine. " They were quite pleased with the tasty results. " The day had become quite warm, and my eyelids drooped against the sun's shining rays. " Desiree', it's important that you listen, as I have every intention of making..." I opened my eyes and saw Uncle Joshua shaking his head back and forth. Marcus took a deep breath and continued, but I wondered what he'd really wanted to say. " The right amount of fungal growth must be present on each bunch of grapes, so our harvests are done in several sweeps, picking out the correct grapes on each pass. "

" Marcus, I'm sure that Desiree' would enjoy seeing firsthand what you're talking about. " I was going to help Marcus gather up the picnic leftovers, but Uncle Joshua took me aside. " Desiree', I came along with the two of you this morning to see for myself how you got along. " He paused. " If I had sensed the slightest bit of animosity or superior attitude on Marcus's part towards you, I'd well understand if you declined spending the coming months with his family, but for your sake I hope you'll stay. "

There was something going on between them that I wasn't privy to, and I decided to stay and solve that mystery before I returned to live at DuMond House with my real family. Maybe I could wrangle the answer from Natalia, or at the very least learn firsthand about the world from a man's perspective,

with Marcus as my teacher. “ Uncle Joshua, I’ve decided to stay with the Count. ”

“ Niece, that’s welcome news. ” He kissed my cheek, then helped me into the buggy. There were only a few men tending to the vineyards and they paid no attention to me when we stopped. Marcus asked their opinions on how fast the rot was progressing and each section leader was very specific about the time-frame for harvest. Marcus and my uncle seemed well pleased with their answers. By late afternoon, I’d been well informed about the soil; the hills to the left had compact soil which produced long lasting wines and the hills to the right had softer soil which produced wines that should be consumed quickly.

We arrived back at the castle just as the sun set on the western horizon. Marcus escorted me to my quarters, where Natalia waited. “ Dinner will be served in one hour. ” Marcus left to freshen up and I proceeded to do the same, knowing that the clothes I wore wouldn’t be acceptable at the dinner table.

Right before I removed my gypsy attire, Sheridan swooshed through the door. “ Where have you been all day? Mother and I were worried. ” She looked me up and down and a smile played on her lips. “ Lowering yourself to the level of a field worker isn’t becoming to an aspiring socialite, Desiree’, but in private, we dress as we really are. ” She snickered, then left, no doubt to have a good laugh as she told Rochelle about my appearance. “ Desiree’, it’s not the outer trappings that make us who and what we are, but the inner workings of the heart which determines our value and self-worth. Sheridan’s heart is iced with cold, while you have a genuine heart of gold. ” Natalia hugged me and my soul smiled. Another sponge bath ensued, then she pinned my hair up with a dark green bow.

Uncle Joshua grinned as I descended the staircase in a dark green taffeta print gown, accented with two rows of light blue and ivory lace on the collar and wrists. “ Desiree’, you’re a true beauty, no matter what you wear. This picture of your loveliness will remain with me when I depart tomorrow morning. ”

I whispered so that only he could hear. “ Uncle, I hope you can deliver a letter from me to Phillipe in Paris. ”

He kissed my cheek and said, “ Of course, Desiree’. I’ll see that he receives it personally. ” He proffered his arm and we walked together into the dining room.

Marcus rose from his seat at the head of the table and pulled out the chair to his right. “ Please be seated, Desiree’. ” Rochelle sat to his left and beside her was Sheridan. Uncle Joshua sat to my right, across from her.

Sheridan grimaced as Marcus seated me. This must be where she always sat, but since I had no say so in the matter I grinned and shrugged my shoulders. I assumed that Marcus was the ultimate host, showing proper respect for a guest of honor and things would return to normal at breakfast.

The meal began with Antipasti Italiani: a huge plate of zucchini, eggplant, carrots, artichokes, sweet peppers and mushrooms that were marinated in a vinaigrette sauce. There were separate sections of olives, cheeses and Alici, a marinated anchovy-like fish.

Sheridan handed me a plate of mixed white and green noodles, covered with an onion, parsley, mushroom and tomato paste butter sauce. “ This goes well with your personality. ” I gave her a questioning look. “ It’s called Paglia e Fieno Contadina, or in English, peasant style straw and hay, a dish of the lower classes. ”

Marcus cut her down a notch from her high horse. “ And you, Dear Sister, have always preferred the Diavola Vermicelli. ” He turned to face me. “ That means Devil’s Little Worms. ”

“ Could I have some of that, please? ” He gave me a small amount and I put a big forkful in my mouth, then gagged and sputtered. I hastily gulped down the wine in my glass.

“ Desiree’, I should’ve mentioned that the tomato sauce is made with hot chilies and spicy peppers. ” He nodded to the waiter, who filled my wineglass to the brim once more. “ Now you can truly say you drink wine with your meals. ”

I felt slightly tipsy, but managed to calm myself by eating small portions of Medaglione Maiale, Manzo, and Montone ala Burro Soffritto: pork, beef, and mutton medallions sautéed in butter. Marcus talked of the various wines

that were currently being produced for world-wide distribution as we ate Composta di Frutta with fragoline di bosco, lamponi, and mirtilli; fruit compote with wild strawberries, raspberries, and blueberries. After dinner the head-waiter brought an unopened bottle of wine to the table. Marcus uncorked it and poured a small amount into an unused glass. “ Desiree’, give me your opinion. ”

I breathed the aroma into my lungs, took a sip and swirled the liquid around on my tongue and in my mouth. “ The first taste is an equal blending of apricots, peaches, and nectarines, but the longer it lingers on my tongue, a unique flavor that I can’t name imbues itself in my senses. ” My eyes closed as the liquid coursed through my veins.

“ It’s the wild pansy; its common name is heartsease and this particular flower is reputed to alleviate the pain of separating from a loved one. ” A warm hand enveloped mine and I opened my eyes to Marcus. “ In Shakespeare’s ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’ it was wild pansy juice that inspired Titania, Queen of the Fairies, with a passion for Bottom, the weaver, who’d been turned into an ass. ” His words went straight to my heart and I blushed profusely.

“ Marcus, you’re embarrassing the poor girl. ” Rochelle seemed upset at his display of affection towards me.

“ Rochelle, as Desiree’s tutor, it’s up to me to school her in any and every way possible. Her lessons today have ranged from soil to Shakespeare; now what’s wrong with that? ”

Rochelle bit her bottom lip and frowned. “ Marcus, I know what’s transpired today and I am very displeased with your actions; tongues are already wagging and gossip is running rampant about you allowing this young impressionable girl to run wild as a gypsy in the fields. People will say she’s no better than a scullery maid, seeking undue favor from the man of the house. We’re quick becoming the laughingstock of Fredericksburg! ”

“ I’m master of this house and when all is said and done, it’s not your concern. ” Marcus turned his back on them and Rochelle and Sheridan stormed out. “ Desiree’, pay them no mind; they’re not used to having their status quo interrupted. ” He raised his glass in a toast. “ I christen our newest vintage, ‘Desiree’s Passion.’ ”

He and Uncle Joshua clinked glasses. “ Sheer perfection, Marcus. Have what we agreed upon delivered to the docks at Dunkirk. ”

When the clock chimed 9 pm Uncle Joshua said, “ Please escort Desiree’ to her quarters, Marcus. ” He hugged me close to him. “ I’ll come by your room before I leave in the morning, Niece. ”

Marcus only lingered outside my door for a moment. “ Pleasant dreams, Desiree’; we’ll see each other tomorrow. ”

He vanished into the castle’s shadows just as Sheridan’s angelic form entered the doorway’s light. “ Sometimes he makes me so mad I could spit nails. ”

“ The male species gives us just cause. ” One of the servants had lit the candles inside my room and I rummaged through the roll top desk drawers, searching for a writing pen, ink, and paper.

“ Has Marcus given you lessons to do already? ” Sheridan was the curious one.

“ No. I have a good friend who’s studying naval architecture at the University of Paris and I was hoping that your mother could issue him a special invitation to attend one or more of the balls at Castle Desiree’; I’d love to see him again. ”

“ And who might this young man be? ”

“ His name is Phillipe and before he became a university student he was First Mate aboard my uncle’s ship, Goddess of the Sea. ” She tapped her fingernails against the desk. “ Uncle Joshua can vouch for his character if need be. ”

“ In that case, I know my mother will coordinate one of the balls to coincide with time he’ll have off from his studies. ” Sheridan seemed to be in a particularly good mood. “ The first masked ball will be held in two and a half weeks on Saturday, October 5th, to celebrate the grape harvest. ”

“ Uncle Joshua promised to hand deliver this message to Phillipe when he

stops in Paris tomorrow night, but I'll add that as a beginning date for him to consider. ”

She turned to leave. “ I'll return in a short while and give you some privacy. ”

I brought my mind back to the task at hand and dipped the pen into the inkwell.

‘Dear Phillipe,

I know it's been quite some time since we wrote to one another, but that doesn't mean I haven't thought of you with a great deal of fondness, wondering how your life at the university has been.

Many things have happened in my life and I now live in Fredericksburg at Castle Desiree' with Count Marcus Canossa and his family. I don't know how much time you have off from your studies, but the first official masked ball of the harvest season will be held here at the castle on Saturday, October 5th. If you agree to come, I can find out for myself if you dance as well as you tell a story or walk the decks of Goddess of the Sea.

Your Little Mermaid,
Desiree' Terrance'

The moment I finished, Sheridan breezed through my door without bothering to knock and waved an envelope beneath my nose. “ Here's a personal invitation for Phillipe stating he may attend any balls of his choice and you can send it along with the letter you've written to him. ” She bubbled over with excitement. “ Tomorrow morning we're going to bathe and then be fitted for a new wardrobe which includes ball gowns and daytime dresses for afternoon teas and socials! ” She clapped her hands, then blew me a kiss as she left for her own quarters.

I slipped the letter in with Rochelle's invitation, dripped hot wax on the envelope and stamped it with my own personal seal, then changed into a nightgown and closed my eyes. My thoughts centered around Phillipe and I drifted off to sleep. A soft rapping came at my door. “ Who is it? ”

“ Your Uncle Joshua, Niece. ” It was still dark when I let him in. He kissed

my forehead and embraced me tightly. “ The hour has come for me to leave. ” He pressed an envelope into my hand. “ This note contains the address where your Aunt or I can be reached if need be and by all means write to Annelle. I’m sure she’d love to hear about the upcoming festival season. ”

My lower lip trembled, but I managed to hold back the tears which threatened to fall. “ Thank you, Uncle Joshua. I’m going to miss you more than words can say, but know there’ll be much to keep me occupied. ”

Another knock came at the door and my uncle opened it to Marcus. “ It’s good that you’re up and about, Desiree’. I have business to attend to in Paris starting tomorrow morning and your uncle has graciously asked me to share his carriage. ” He took my hand in his. “ I’ll return next Thursday evening, but Natalia will see to your needs. ”

As if on cue, she walked in and nodded at the men. “ Your carriage is ready. ”

I sighed as I handed the envelope to Uncle Joshua. “ Make sure Phillipe receives this. Rochelle has included a special invitation for him to attend all the balls. ” I paused for a moment. “ It would be so nice to see his face and hear his voice again. ”

As quick as a wink Marcus frowned, then a smile froze on his lips. “ I’ll look forward to dancing with you at each and every ball this season, Desiree’. ” He kissed the back of my hand, smartly clicked his heels together, then left.

“ Uncle Joshua, may God keep you safe until we meet again. ” I kissed his cheek and watched him leave my life.

Natalia put her arms around me. “ I know how hard it is on the heart when those you love have obligations to meet which don’t include you. ” I cried hard and heavy, feeling the loss of family hit me once again.

“ You mustn’t let the other servants see how you feel inside or heaven forbid Sheridan or Rochelle, now that Marcus has left. I’m the only one who can protect you from...” She didn’t finish her sentence as the door creaked open.

Rochelle leaned in, followed by servants bearing steaming water which was quickly poured into the tub. “ Desiree’, we usually have no need to rush, but as Hostess for the first ball of the season I have many duties to perform. Natalia, make sure she’s downstairs by 8am since the dressmaker will arrive promptly at nine. ” She and the other servants left without another word.

Natalia helped me undress, then stirred fragrant bath salts into the water. “ The lavender heat will calm and soothe you, Desiree’ . ”

She began to wash my back. “ Natalia, what or who do you think I need protecting from? ”

“ Unscrupulous would-be-suitors. I know all the young eligible bachelors and their families and their standing in the community where they live. I know about their wealth and education, their habits both good and bad, what they do and do not believe, and most importantly how they treat their mothers and sisters in public and private. ”

“ I don’t understand. Is it proper to meet the young men before the masked ball takes place? ”

“ All the young men and women gather at the afternoon socials leading up to the grand event, and thereafter on a smaller scale if both the man and woman are interested in each other. The Pair Socials are limited to 8 couples or less, where more time is allotted to talking and walking in the gardens. The couples are always within eyesight of chaperones, so nothing untoward can happen. ” I wondered if I’d have any time to myself before the socials started. Natalia answered my question. “ On Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday mornings, you’ll be prepared for the afternoon socials which can last well into the late evening hours. ”

“ That’s a lot to absorb and not look forward to, Natalia. ” I sighed and knew there’d be no glimpses of paradise forthcoming.

“ Have no fears, Desiree’; this season will pass in God’s own time. ”

“ More like the Devil’s own time. ” I smiled for an instant. Would this be a case of ‘out of the frying pan and into the fire’, a comparison of living with my father and sister against what I’d have to endure in this social season with strangers? I rolled my eyes and prayed for a quick end to things which

would bore me to tears.

Breakfast was simple fare. Salsiccie; fresh sausages, bruschetta; oven-toasted day-old bread with a topping of olive oil, fresh diced tomatoes, garlic, oregano and other spices, and anguria and uve; fresh sliced watermelon and grapes picked from the vine. The only food I had a taste for were the grapes which were sweeter than honey in my mouth.

Rochelle, Sheridan and I walked to the sewing room, where we were measured for the dresses and ball gowns we'd be wearing in the coming weeks. Bolts of cloth in various colors, both solids and prints, were stacked against the wall. Many seamstresses and dressmakers were in attendance and before the afternoon was over each of us had wire-hooped undergarments, the rage of feminine high society. Layered on top of the hoop were petticoats; my first layer was made of white cotton, accented with crochet and ribbon on the bottom third of the garment. The second cotton layer was encircled by a satin rose' trim and edged with blue-silver colored ribbon; the scalloped hemline of the third layer was lace and edged with apricot cream trim, while embroidered jasper colored squares and interweaved floral designs in all four colors decorated the fine netting.

“ Desiree’, the hard part is over. Now that the seamstresses have your exact measurements, we’ll pick and choose what colorings, patterns and styles will suit you best. ” With Rochelle’s practiced eye it didn’t take long, but by the time we finished, the afternoon light had given way to darkness and I was glad to have supper sent up to my room.

Natalia waited for me at my turret quarters. “ You look tired my little ‘Tartufi di Mare’. ” I gave her a questioning look. “ That’s a small truffle clam, and like it, the face you present to the outside world shouldn’t necessarily show what you might be thinking or feeling on the inside. ”

I sighed. “ I have no experience in hiding what I feel. ”

“ Desiree’, for your own protection and self-preservation, you must not appear vulnerable to untrusting souls, or you’ll allow them to gain the upper hand in every circumstance. ”

“ Natalia, will you teach me what I need to know? ” I couldn’t stifle my yawns.

“ Yes, Desiree’. It’s for those who love you with no reservations that the truth and honesty of your emotions can be shown. ” She helped me undress for bed, then kissed my forehead. “ Over the next few weeks you’ll have plenty of time to practice. ” I climbed under the covers and slept peacefully.

Chapter 20

I slept later than normal because I wouldn’t be needed for final fittings until the next morning. There was a sharp rap on the door. “ Who is it? ”

“ Sheridan. ” She came in, followed by a maidservant who set down a tray of breakfast food. “ Mother says you may go to the library or music room or even take a walk on the castle grounds today, but keep in mind that it’s unladylike to wander anywhere else, especially to the vineyards without an escort. ” Her voice was short and clipped and she left, not taking any more time with me than was necessary.

I nibbled on biscuits and grape jam as I hurriedly dressed, savoring the given freedom to explore on my own. Thank heaven I’d paid close attention to which maze of hallways would lead me to the library and music rooms. The door to the unoccupied library was open and a huge fire blazed in the hearth, giving a glow to the elaborate yellow-red sunburst design on the wood floor. There were no pictures or paintings, just built-in cherry-wood bookcases lined from floor to ceiling with enough titles to keep one busy for months on end. Freestanding silver Argand lights were placed near the seating area, but could be easily moved to shed light elsewhere in the room.

I closed my eyes and ran my fingertips across the top row of book spines, counted to three, then stopped. The gold-embossed title was ‘Horse History’. I expected to see words in common type prints, but the pages were handwritten in a flowing masculine style; a man’s personal notes collected and written down over the years. I plopped myself down on the Knole sofa; it had high-cushioned arms that could be raised or lowered to form a daybed and was upholstered in warm rusted-orange cotton, matching the sunburst on the floor.

‘The Andalusian horse more than likely developed from cross-breeding

African Barb horses with the indigenous stock of the Iberian Peninsula, known for centuries as Andulas.

Andalusians are compact and impressive, having a convex head profile, a short and powerful neck, a short back, a sloping croup and a high degree of flexibility in the hind leg joints. This allows them to move in collected gaits, well suited to *Haute Ecole* or High School in the riding academies of Europe. Andalusians can be grey, white or bay with thick luxuriant manes and tails.

Although they have placid temperaments, at one time they were considered to be the perfect war horse. They appear throughout history in great battles, accompanied by renowned historical figures, such as the Greek officer, Xenophon, who wrote 'De Re Equestri', a treatise on the horse; it's not limited to horsemanship, but also shows how to avoid being cheated when buying a horse, and how to train a horse.' A hand drawn picture of a grey Andalusian accompanied the text.

My eyes grew heavy and I closed them for mere minutes, but hours had passed when I opened them again. I ate the small lunch which had been placed on the cherry-wood table with gusto, then went to take a self-guided tour around the entire castle before sunset.

Outside the front door was the road leading back to France. Ancient pine and fir trees made a shady canopy over it and I walked a short distance in order to observe a front view of Castle Desiree'. Bright sunlight played among white flowered cherry trees, and their red and white turret flags fluttered in the gentle breeze. Bluebirds twittered overhead, and butterflies added a festive touch to the beauty of the day. To my left along the woodland's edge grew wild pansy bushes, blooming in riotous colors of purple, white, and yellow. I remembered what Marcus had said and picked a bunch of them to dry in hopes that their scented decoration would help me get over missing Uncle Joshua. I tied them with my favorite red and white silk hair ribbon and put them in my dress pocket.

I rounded the western corner and was greeted by the most lovely water parterre'; liquid bubbled up from an underground stream, then flowed into small rectangular and triangular basins that spilled over descending stepping stones into round and kidney-shaped reflecting pools. The water cascaded, then disappeared down the sloping hillside through trees and mossy rills, a

watery choir of changing volumes, sounds, and moods that brought joy and peace to my heart. I walked further down the rocky hillside path in great expectations of finding its splashing friendship once again, but found a dark bottomless well surrounded by red-berried holly bushes. Stepping out from behind the fluid falls was a man in priestly garb with his back turned towards me. I hid in the bushy shadows and watched as he placed black pillared candles around the well's edge; he lit each of them, then offered up praises to the god he worshipped.

‘As I lay the candles down one by one
The flames of love are sent to you
The darkness is our love for you
A blended inspiration
The balance a continuation
A well of deepness our desire’

He stood up as if searching the area, then raised his hands in supplication and screeched, “ There’s an unknown presence desecrating your holy ground! ” He stared directly at me. “ Only consecrated family members are allowed to worship and share the blessed rites; leave now or suffer eternal damnation! ” I inched my way back up the path as quietly as I could. There was no telling what religion he practiced, but at the very least he’d given me fair warning not to come back. That would be an easy feat because I’d never consent to becoming a member of the Count’s family.

The uphill climb proved to be difficult as a sudden cloudburst made the stony ground slick and treacherous. I fell to my knees numerous times before finally stepping onto a level surface once again, but made little headway through the howling downpour. I felt along the castle wall and found a recessed archway where I huddled for protection from the nasty weather. My eyes adjusted to the darkness and I saw a wooden doorway. I leaned against it and was thanking my lucky stars when it opened unexpectedly, sending me tumbling down a short flight of stairs. I landed on my derrière in front of a cornered free-standing Argand lamp that dimly lit the small enclosure; I could either venture forth into an unfamiliar hallway or go back up the steps into the biting rain.

The door didn’t budge an inch, so I made my way through twisting turns, which gradually graded upwards. The entire length was faintly lit by sputtering candles and at the very end was a massive oak door. I called out,

but received no answer, so I rattled the doorknob and was astonished when it swung inward.

The distinct aroma of cinnamon and cloves tantalized my nostrils, even though the room's interior was dark and frigid. I went to inspect a sliver of light against the far wall and my hands came into contact with thick heavysset velvet. I pushed the deep burgundy curtains as far apart as they would go and was impressed by a view of distant vineyards through an arched window. I watched lightning streak across the stormy skies, then zigzag back inside to reveal masculine effects in hunter green, deep burgundy, licorice black, and muted gold. The polished redwood floor gleamed in the blinding light; ancient woven tapestries graced the walls depicting knights in shining armor, ladies in waiting, and royalty in the form of kings, queens, princes, and princesses. Two thickly upholstered burgundy chairs sat near the back wall with a small round table positioned between them.

At the foot of the four-poster bed stood a magnificent cedar chest with a polished gold lock and key firmly in place. I heard faint voices and footsteps coming from the opposite end of the room and another entrance door opened. Two servant girls entered and began the process of tidying up. I quickly raised the lid and curled myself on the hard floor of the empty chest and quietly closed it before they noticed my presence. They giggled and tittered, making much ado about being inside the Master's quarters. "I'd give my eyeteeth to have the Count throw glances my way like he does with Miss Desiree'." There were huge sighs. "He loves her so much that he instantly agreed to be her tutor and on her Uncle's terms, no less!"

The other voice said, "You do know the only reason he prepared and decorated the turret quarters was as a betrothal gift for her, and that can only mean one thing; Count Marcus intends to make Miss Desiree' his future bride."

I heard gales of laughter. "Neither his stepmother or stepsister were pleased by those actions. And when Harry told us about Miss Desiree' being given the seat of honor to the right of Count Marcus last night...well, one wonders if Miss Desiree' has been versed in Fredericksburg etiquette? You and I both know that particular dining room chair is strictly reserved for a wife or the fiancée of an engaged couple."

"It did both those women a world of good to be brought down from their

high and mighty horses, but I guarantee trouble ahead for Miss Desiree'! ” Their voices drifted away as they completed their duties. I hastily moved to the door and opened it, peeking both ways to make sure the coast was clear. I ran like the wind in the only direction provided and found a set of granite stairs that led to the casement walkways connecting all four turrets. The storm had passed and the setting sun turned what was left of the water droplets into sparkling amber diamonds. I felt doubly blessed and silently thanked the gods that no one had seen me leave Marcus's quarters.

Natalia stood inside my doorway with her hands upon her hips. “ Young Lady, where in heaven's name have you been? I was worried half to death! ”

Honesty seemed to be the best policy for the moment. “ Natalia, I'm truly sorry that I upset you. When I finished eating lunch, I strolled around the castle grounds, but lost my bearings in the deluge. ”

She kissed my cheek. “ Turn around Desiree' and I'll help you out of these muddy clothes. ” I reached into my dress pocket, hoping to retrieve the small bunch of wild pansies, but they and my favorite hair ribbon were missing. I held back the tears that threatened to fall, knowing there'd be other pansies to pick and other ribbons to adorn my hair. Natalia bathed me, then slipped a nightgown over my head. Supper consisted of hearty stew and crusty bread and I ate until I was full and contented.

When I was graced with late evening privacy, I thought long and hard about the day's events. What the servant girls had said was mere speculation and was quickly dismissed as idle gossip. I drifted off to sleep, only to be awakened by a hard tapping on my door. My weekend hours were occupied with Natalia and the seamstresses doing final fittings.

Monday morning arrived with undue haste. Servants followed Natalia into my room and I was bathed in lavender scented water, then dried off with the softest of Egyptian cotton towels. They helped me into white silk pantaloons and a matching whalebone corset that was laced so tight I could barely breathe. Two servant girls positioned the wire hoop on my waist and hips. “ Raise your arms, Desiree' ”. The elegant afternoon gown had a shimmery gold bodice with a white lace collar. The upper portions of the long sleeves were made from the same material and were gathered for a full look, while white lace trimmed the wrists. The skirt fell straight in front and was pleated

in back and woven through its gold material were thin black and red velvet lines. My hair lay in ringlets against my neck and was adorned with black and red velvet bows. Three inch black kid shoes completed the outfit.

Rochelle entered my room and smiled. “ Desiree’, you’ll have all the young men vying for the favor of sharing a moment alone with you. ” She glanced at an engraved invitation. “ This afternoon we’ll be visiting the Duke of Henroi and his family at their palatial winter home. Please be kind and gracious to them. ”

Natalia and I followed her downstairs to the waiting carriage. The ride was pleasant enough, but I suffered through the worst afternoon of my entire life. The Duke and his family were insufferable oafs, as were most of the other attendees. The hours crawled by in the same unpleasant manner for the next three days as I saw the same faces fawning over each other time and again.

Thursday evening I was more than glad to be back at Castle Desiree’. Even though the hour was late I couldn’t sleep, so I walked a short way along the castle casement, deeply breathing the cool night air into my empty lungs. Purple clouds drifted across the bright expanse of moon and I nearly jumped out of my skin when unknown hands fell on my shoulders. “ Please don’t scream or you’ll wake the entire household. ” I was ecstatic to hear Marcus’s voice and thankful to have someone intelligent to converse with. “ Have you enjoyed this week of parties and social gatherings, Desiree’? ”

I pouted and shook my head. “ I’d rather experience the torments of Hell than endure one more minute of this insufferable social season. ”

“ Was it that bad? ” Marcus was sympathetic to my tirade.

I laughed and spun around. “ Even worse! I need wide open spaces, and the freedom to just be who and what I am. ”

He guffawed. “ Yes, I well remember attending all those stiff, boring parties when I was younger: I wouldn’t wish that misery upon anyone, male or female. ” I shivered and Marcus placed his jacket around my shoulders. It reminded me of his room and I was grateful the darkness hid the rising blush in my cheeks. “ Desiree’, I know that you’re a free spirit who’s not constrained by the whims of society. If you grant me one favor, I’ll see that your only social obligations are to attend the balls. ”

That idea tempted me sorely. “ What did you have in mind, Marcus? ”

“ Rise early in the morning and accompany me to the town of Turlough. ” I waited pensively. “ Don’t worry, Desiree’. Natalia will be our chaperone. ”

I thought for a moment. A trip with Marcus and Natalia sounded better than attending another week’s round of parties and teas with Rochelle and Sheridan. “ Yes, Marcus, I’ll consent to go with you. ”

“ Rest assured you won’t be disappointed, Desiree’. ” He cupped my elbow and guided me back to my quarters, then raised my palm to his lips; the warmth of his touch caused a delightful shiver to course down my spine. Marcus didn’t bother to ask that his coat be returned, and as he closed the door behind him, I wrapped myself tightly in smells of cinnamon and cloves and slept peacefully.

It was still dark outside when my doorknob rattled. “ Who is it? ”

“ Natalia. I hope you’re up and about as we have very little time. ” I opened the door, yawning and rubbing my sleep-filled eyes. “ Desiree’, first it was sleeping in your clothes, and now you’re sleeping in the Count’s clothes; where will it all end? ” Her laugh was hearty and good spirited. “ I know all about your late evening walk with him. ” She handed me clothes similar to those I’d worn when I visited the grape arbors with Marcus. I dressed in silence, wondering when the servants would arrive to pack my bags, but was given no time to ask or even think before Natalia ushered me downstairs to the waiting carriage.

I climbed in and sat across from Marcus. Natalia closed the door from the outside and I was left alone with him, unchaperoned and unprotected. I clinched my hands into fisted balls and scrunched into the corner, cursing myself as I contemplated my endless bad luck with men. Marcus took the opportunity to slide over beside me, blocking any remnants of escape.

“ What seems to be the matter, Desiree’? ”

I was extremely upset. “ A proper young lady shouldn’t be left alone in the company of a man she barely knows. ” I looked out the side window and saw another carriage following us from a short distance behind.

Marcus handed me a red flag. “ This should ease your misgivings, Desiree’ . If you feel I’m being forward, or acting the complete fool, you may wave this. Natalia’s driver has my full permission to overtake us and you’ll be free to ride with her the rest of the way after she admonishes me about unseemly manners! ” His eyes twinkled and his laugh eased my discomfort. I felt safe enough to tell him of my misadventures with the other men I’d known. Marcus listened without interruption and his countenance hardened for a fleeting moment. “ Desiree’ , what happened to you with those heathen men was never your fault and you shouldn’t have been made to feel as such. ” He smiled. “ I consider your remaining here with me both an honor and a privilege. ” I cried away pent-up misery and fell asleep in Marcus’s arms. In my dreams I heard his voice murmuring that he loved me and would always remain by my side.

Marcus shook my shoulder. “ Desiree’ , we’ve arrived at our destination. ” The driver had stopped in front of a large thatched-roof cottage on a small tree-lined village street. Dark green ivy covered the cobblestone walls and late afternoon sunlight reflected off the sparkling windowpanes. Surrounding the yard were stately cedar and cherry trees and growing in great abundance were herb bushes. Lazy lines of smoke poured forth from the side chimney and a large stream babbled near the back.

The door opened and a man, a woman and two dark-haired children came out and Marcus introduced us. “ Desiree’ Terrance, I’d like you to meet my very good friends. ” He introduced them one by one. “ Ernesto, Issabelle, Doreena, and Migel, the Florenza family. ” Ernesto, Doreena, and Migel gathered round him with handshakes, hugs and much merriment and Issabelle draped her arms across my shoulders.

“ I’m so pleased to meet all of you. ” I’d barely gotten the words out of my mouth when the children tugged on my arms, pulling me towards the lily pads and dusty blue hyacinths that floated in the stream. Graceful swans swam among them, reminding me of the Three Graces Lake and Phillippe; I wanted to be at Castle Desiree’ in case I received a reply to the letter and invitation Uncle Joshua had delivered to him, but had no idea how long we’d be away. I sighed and turned my thoughts to the beauty of the present moment. “ Your parents are fortunate to own such a charming house. ”

They both giggled. “ Miss Desiree’ , Count Marcus owns this house as well as the Turlough Winery that my father oversees; our family lives near the

edge of the forest and we were specially invited here this evening to meet you. ” Doreena pointed towards the woods, then fingered my peasant’s blouse. “ The last lady Count Marcus brought looked down her nose at us as if we were no better than ants crawling on the ground. ”

“ But ants are very wise and industrious creatures. ” I smiled at her.

Marcus rounded the corner. “ Supper’s ready. ” The children ran off, giggles trailing behind them. “ They can be quite a handful, but you’ve managed to win them over, Desiree’ . ”

“ It’s quite the opposite, Marcus; their parents are very blessed to have such honest and loving children. ”

He linked my arm in his and we walked to the kitchen and ate stew and biscuits. Talk centered on the grape harvest already in progress and the wine cellars that Marcus owned. “ The hour grows late, Desiree’; it’s a good thing you caught up on your sleep today, because tomorrow you won’t even have time to catnap. ”

Doreena led the way upstairs to the small bedroom Natalia had prepared. “ I hope you don’t mind, but I’m staying here with you tonight. ” She waited to see my reaction.

“ It’s been a while since I’ve had female companionship. ” I hugged her tightly to my breast.

She closed the door and we readied ourselves for bed; warm water was in the pitcher and we bathed with lemon and lavender soap. “ This is Mama’s favorite. ”

“ Your mother must be a very caring person if she lets complete strangers use her favorite soap. ”

“ But you’re not a stranger to us, Miss Desiree’; whenever the Count comes to check on wine production at Turlough, he always talks about you. ” Her knowing smile said she was privy to certain information, but was forbidden to tell.

That made no sense to me. “ Count Marcus must have come by this past

week and said he would be bringing a guest for you to meet? ”

Doreena shook her head and laughed. “ No, Miss Desiree’. For the past two years he’s mentioned you each and every time I’ve seen him. ”

“ And what has he said about me? ” I was past curious.

“ He speaks of your beauty and kindness in words that befit a man who loves deeply. ”

The first time I saw Marcus was two years ago, but I had no dealings with him until Uncle Joshua brought me to Fredericksburg. Had he taken an interest in me, but kept his distance at the urging of my Uncle? It seemed a private conversation with the esteemed Count was in order.

“ Thank you, Doreena. It feels good to have you confide in me. ” The goosedown bed was sheer heaven and we slept the night away.

Morning came bright and early. Natalia knocked, then entered the small room. “ Rise and shine, girls; we have much to do today. ” Doreena and I wore comfortable peasant clothes and after we laced up our boots we raced outside to Marcus’s carriage, but he was nowhere in sight. “ Where are we going, Natalia? ”

“ You’ll know soon enough, Desiree’. ” We bounced over a roughly rutted road that wound through sun-dappled woods which eventually gave way to a flat grassy field filled with many horses and fine carriages. Men, women, and children milled about, talking, gesturing and laughing.

Doreena laughed as we climbed out of the carriage. “ This is the Annual Turlough Horse Fair. ” She spotted some of her friends and ran off to join them. “ I’ll see you later, Desiree’. ”

“ We’re free to wander about until noon and then we have to meet Count Marcus. ” Natalia walked at a quick pace and I followed close behind, amazed at the different languages being spoken as horses were sold and traded among the throngs of men. She stopped in front of an open booth and haggled prices with a grey-haired gypsy woman selling bolts of exquisite red velvet cloth.

I turned around to survey the crowd and felt a hand fall on my shoulder. I thought for a minute it might be Marcus, but was more than pleased when Phillippe's face came into view. "Your Uncle told me I might find you here, Desiree'." He yelled loudly to be heard over the din of noise, and I didn't give Natalia a second thought. It seemed quite natural for us to stroll away from the booth and past the crowds to a quiet spot near the edge of the woods. Phillippe swung me around in his arms until I was dizzy and when he finally set me down I laughed through tears of happiness and joy.

"How I've longed to see your face and hear your voice again, Phillippe." He told me about his studies and the friends he'd made, and I told him about life with my Uncle, Aunt, and Cousin, and Marcus and his family at Castle Desiree'. I lost all track of time until the sun was high overhead. One last question came from my lips as Marcus strode into sight.

His manners were courtly and precisely polite, but his smile was cold, chilling me to the bone. I knew I'd pay a high price for wandering off with a man Marcus didn't know. "Would you kindly introduce me to your new friend, Desiree'?"

"Count Marcus, this is Phillippe, my Uncle Joshua's First Mate. He and I have known each other since we were aboard Goddess of the Sea." They talked for a few minutes of life on the sea and at their respective universities as if I was not present.

Phillippe turned to leave. "The answer to your last question is yes, Desiree'...if time permits."

I was sad to see him go, especially in light of the tongue lashing I was sure to receive from Marcus. He paced back and forth like a caged lion.

"Desiree', you've shown lack of responsibility and caring for those who love you." I withered under his stare and focused my eyes on the ground, but Marcus raised my chin. "I'm sure you weren't brought up this way." I shook my head no. "The first thing you need to do is apologize to Natalia for your rude behavior; she's worried herself half to death because many of these horse traders steal young, beautiful females and auction them off as slaves to the highest bidder!"

I was shocked and frightened at this bit of unsettling news and a fresh batch of tears welled in my eyes. "I was just so happy to see a familiar face that I

gave no thought to anything else, Marcus. I'm truly sorry and will make amends with Natalia. Please forgive me?"

"Of course, Desiree', but from now on you must let one of us know where you are at all times." His arms enfolded me. "Your uncle would expect nothing less and I'm not up to sending him a telegraph bearing bad news." Marcus handed me his handkerchief and I wiped my eyes. "This matter is settled between us." The scent of roasting meat met my nostrils and we walked towards one of the food booths. "Are you hungry, Desiree'?" I nodded my head yes and he spoke to the cook. "Spiedo vitello ala patatine nouvelle." He handed me a skewered portion of veal and new potatoes that were spiced to perfection, then gave me a mug of sweet apple cider to wash it down with.

Natalia joined us and I threw my arms around her neck, begging her forgiveness. She was stern, but gentle. "Desiree', how can the Count or I protect you when you walk away without a word? My heart sank to the pit of my stomach when I couldn't find you anywhere near me." She kissed my forehead and I knew all was right with the world.

We spent the rest of the afternoon looking at horseflesh and I listened to owners and prospective buyers argue about price and breeding. What I remembered most was a turbaned man speaking to a large group of people gathered near his horses. "According to Bedouin legend, God created the Arabian horse from the South Wind, saying, 'I call you Horse and by my powers I make you Arabian. I have hung happiness from your forelock and you shall be Lord of the other animals. Men will follow in the flight of your shadow, pursuing you for the untold riches and fortune that can be attained as they gallop in meditation upon your back.'" His teeth were very white against the darkness of his skin. "You cannot buy a finer stallion than this ebony one, gentlemen."

The carriage ride back to the cottage was a perfect ending as late afternoon gave way to early twilight. I ate supper in my room and when I finished bathing Marcus came to see me, not mincing words. "What do you feel in your heart for Phillippe?"

I sat on the bed with my arms around my knees and smiled as I thought of the short time we'd spent onboard Goddess of the Sea. "I love him with much fondness. Phillippe is the first real friend I ever had in my life; all I ever

had to do with him was be myself and that was enough. ” Marcus pondered what I said, but I wanted and needed truth from him as well. “ May I speak openly with you? ” He seemed surprised, but nodded his head.

“ I was intrigued by something Doreena told me last night and I’d love an explanation from you. ”

“ Go ahead, Desiree’ . ”

“ She said that for the past two years you’ve mentioned my beauty and kindness in words that befit a man who loves deeply, and yet we weren’t formally introduced until eleven days ago. ”

Marcus didn’t hesitate to share his feelings. “ The first time I saw you at your Uncle’s house, you reminded me of a woodnymph in all her glory. You took my breath away with laughter that was brighter than notes played from a piper’s flute and raven tresses flying freer than dark clouds scudding across a stormy sky. ” He gazed deep into my eyes. “ I fell in love with you in front of the Grand Hotel in Nancy, when I almost knocked you down. The sun presented itself as a halo around your head and I knew without a doubt that you were an angel sent from heaven to ease my loneliness and bring joy into my life. ”

I didn’t know how to reply to him because no man had ever talked of me or to me like that. “ What of my Uncle Joshua; did he know of your feelings? ”

Marcus sighed. “ Yes, I’ve written and spoken with your uncle on numerous occasions about my feelings towards you; all he’s ever wanted is your happiness, and so do I. ” He gathered my hands in his, then kissed my forehead. “ I love you, Desiree’; my heart is yours, now and forever. ” He kissed my forehead.

I wasn’t unhappy with what he said and reached up to kiss his cheek, but his lips searched out my own to show me the sincerity of his spoken words. His kiss on the east turret had startled and confused me, but this time around I was prepared to accept the affections he offered, although not ready to make a commitment. “ Thank you for being honest with me, Marcus. I’ll take everything you’ve said into my heart. ”

“ I couldn’t ask for more, Desiree’ . ” His eyes sparkled and he whistled a tune as he left, a man whose burdens had been lifted.

Chapter 21

I slept peacefully through the night, but was awakened when morning sunlight streamed through parted curtains; Marcus stood at the side of the bed, watching me. “ You must be quiet as a country mouse, Desiree’ . ” He handed me a cotton print robe to put on over my nightgown and I followed him downstairs. Waiting outside the door were two saddled horses; a grey Andalusian that bore a similarity to the illustration in the library book at Castle Desiree’ and the magnificent black Arabian stallion I’d seen at the horse fair.

“ Who do they belong to, Marcus? ” I stroked the Andalusian’s dark grey nose and a whinny was my reply.

Marcus turned towards the stallion. “ Dark Desire is mine, Desiree’ , and the name of your filly is...” I looked at his face to see if he was teasing me, but he nodded his head and smiled. “ Once you name a horse, it belongs to you for life. ”

I caught her name on the morning breeze. “ TaraRose. ”

“ Why that particular name, Desiree’? ”

“ In Irish, Tara means hill, and my middle name is Rose, thus Hill of Roses. ”

He beamed, then stated, “ The word rose is also related to hros, a short form of Germanic origin that means horse, so it fits her well. Get dressed and we’ll ride. ”

Laid out on my bed were leather pants and a white peasant blouse. I laced up a pair of black riding boots and excitedly raced downstairs. Marcus handed me a wide-brimmed hat to shade my face from the sun and I tied it under my chin, then he gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. I put my left foot in the stirrup and plopped into the saddle and Marcus climbed on the stallion’s back. Our remaining days in Turlough were spent riding and talking,

growing closer in hearts and minds.

The morning before we returned to Castle Desiree', we chanced upon an abundant field of wild pansies. Marcus tightened the reins on Dark Desire. "Would you like to stop?" I nodded my head yes. He helped me down, then hobbled the horses. "This area has an old legend concerning the wild pansy. An enchanting young maiden was enamored of a certain young man and one fine summer's day she picked a bunch of the colorful flowers to give him as a present. Now she knew full well that if her lips caressed the petals, they'd act like an aphrodisiac the moment he smelled them. When he did, his heart was bound to hers forever and they married within the month." I giggled with mirth. "Legends have a way of coming true, whether you believe them or not."

I raised my face to him. "What's in my heart is to speak of the spiritual intimacy that draws a man and woman together in the simple, yet complex bonds of love. It's a matter of how it should be accomplished; not with deceit, but with truth and honesty."

He pulled my body close to his and savored my lips like a fine wine, but I was the one who became intoxicated. My pulse raced and my knees grew weak. "I love you, Marcus." The words escaped from within my heart and poured forth into his listening ears. His eyes gleamed in triumph, but I wouldn't have accepted less.

"You're my heart's one true desire, from now until my dying day." Marcus and I left for Castle Desiree' on Thursday, October 3rd, to have time for our final costume fittings before the masked ball on Saturday night.

Friday morning dawned cool, clear and bright. I rose early so I could entertain loving thoughts of Marcus, but my musings were interrupted by a knock on the door. Rochelle came in, followed by seamstresses who carried a frilly pink organza gown. "Desiree', seeing as you weren't here to make a decision for yourself, this is what you'll wear to the ball." Her words were sweet, but her eyes were veiled in venom. I didn't understand the reason, but figured I'd disrupted all her plans to show me off at the teas and afternoon socials.

I bit my lip. There were Pollyanna ruffles upon ruffles, upon ivory-colored satin and lace bows. When Rochelle handed me the matching bonnet and a

large shepherd's staff, I knew she wanted me to be Little Bo Peep, Mistress of Lost Sheep. I sighed; being shunned by most suitors wasn't a bothersome thought, but I feared that Marcus would totally ignore me in this unsophisticated outfit. As if on cue, he strode through the door and stopped dead in his tracks, his gales of laughter cutting me to the quick. "Why Miss Peep, you present a charming picture of innocence and I'd gladly consent to being one of your stray sheep on any day of the week."

"I suppose that tomorrow night you'll be among the lost, not bothering to dance with me at the ball?"

Rochelle answered before Marcus could utter a word. "Desiree', as host of the Harvest Ball, it's his obligation." She tsked. "Now that your fitting is complete, I must leave." She motioned to one of the servant girls. "Stay here and make sure that the material isn't soiled in any way." Rochelle and the rest of her entourage left amidst snickers and finger-pointing.

"Desiree', we need to talk and I'll wait outside until you're properly dressed." I wasted no time in removing the dreaded frills as Marcus walked out the door, mumbling about wolves in sheep's clothing.

He met me at the turret landing and marched me downstairs. Once outside he led me to the recessed doorway near the front castle wall and I pretended I'd never been through the hallway that ended at his personal quarters. He opened the door and bowed. "After you, Mademoiselle." I turned around when I heard the lock click. He had both arms behind his back. "Which hand do you choose?" I pointed to his right and he produced, then gave me my now dried bunch of pansies, their stalks still tied with my red and white silk hair ribbon. I searched his face for anger, but he surprised me with the depth of his words. "What was lost is now found, Desiree'...untie the ribbon and discover the place for your heart and life." I did and beneath it was a beautiful golden ring with an oval shaped lavender moonstone surrounded by an inner circle of seven emeralds and an outer circle of seven opals. Marcus knelt on bended knee and slipped it on the 3rd finger of my right hand. "This is the very ring my father graced my mother with on the day they wed, a continuous circle of love that I want to share only with you. Please marry me, Desiree'."

I threw my arms around his neck and shouted loud enough for the entire

world to hear, “ Yes, Marcus, I’ll marry you. ”

His kiss was dangerous in its sweetness and gentleness, my senses attuned to physical desires that would be fulfilled when we became husband and wife.

“ Come the day we wed, I’ll put this ring on your rightful finger, the one whose veins lead straight to your heart. ” He hugged me close to him.

“ I’ll take care of all the arrangements, my Love, just as I have for your ballgown tomorrow evening. ” Marcus raised the trunk lid and lifted out the most glorious gown and cape I’d ever seen. The material was deep red velvet with long sleeves and three rows of white French lace piping that flaired at the wrist. The silk petticoat was satinrose’ pink with a hoop and the collar of the heart-shaped bodice was trimmed in the same French lace. The red velvet hooded cape was trimmed in satinrose’ pink lace and tied under the neck, flowing to just above the ankle. The finishing touches were red kid shoes and a red feathered mask for disguise. He laughed at my delight. “ Did you think I’d have my future bride dress in that monstrosity Rochelle had made for you? ”

“ My love for you transcends anything I’ve ever felt before, Marcus; you not only say the words, but show how much you care by your actions. ” A sudden inspiration came to mind about a token of love I could give to him, but first I needed to talk to Natalia.

“ Desiree’, I told Natalia that I was going to ask you to marry me, so you may talk to her and show her your ring, but please don’t mention what we’ve discussed or show this ring to anyone else until the wedding preparations are settled to my satisfaction. ” Marcus glanced at his pocketwatch. “ As much as I entertain thoughts of keeping you here with me in my quarters, it wouldn’t be proper. I’ll have this costume delivered to your room later on this evening. ” He held out his arm and we walked back the way we had come, so no one would be the wiser.

Fredericksburg customs were certainly different, but I didn’t put up an argument. Natalia met us at the main door and enclosed my right hand tightly as she escorted me to my rooms for a mid-afternoon meal. I picked at the food, but felt no hunger. “ Natalia, I’m so happy, my heart is singing. ”

“ Yes, Desiree’, but you must make a point of remembering what I said and keep your thoughts, feelings and emotions well hidden from everyone, until you and Marcus say your wedding vows. Hold out your hand. ” She slipped

the ring off my finger and into her pocket. “ When the time is right you will wear it again. ”

I took a seat at my writing desk, reached behind the stoppered inkwell and brought out a plain wooden box filled with pens, pencils and erasers. Underneath the false bottom was a black velvet pouch and situated inside were gold nuggets, a square-cut black onyx, and quite a few small diamonds and blood-red rubies. “ Natalia, do you know any jewelers who could make a ring to my specifications? ”

“ Why would you need another ring, Little Tartufi di Mare? The one Marcus gave to you is so near and dear to his heart. ”

I smiled. “ I know it is, but I want to give him a special wedding present. ” I showed her the loose stones I had, then told her what I had in mind. “ These belonged to my mother, before she passed away. ”

She kissed my cheek. “ I have a friend who owes me a big favor and he’ll be glad to make a spectacular present that Marcus will treasure all of his life. It’s too late this evening, but rest assured I’ll give him your instructions tomorrow. ”

I was tired from the day’s excitement and went to bed early, counting pink sheep in my dreams. When I woke, Natalia was in my room with biscuits and honey for breakfast. “ My friend said your ring will be ready in a week and a half. ”

“ I want to surprise Marcus with it on October 17th, my 18th birthday. ”

She gave me her seal of approval. “ To give a gift to the one you love on your own birthday is a wonderful and gracious idea, Desiree’. ” The rest of my morning and afternoon were spent being readied for the Harvest Ball.

Sheridan came to check on me on few hours before I was to make a grand entrance downstairs. The red velvet costume had been hidden out of sight and she fingered the Little Bo Peep organza. “ I know you’ll look divine in this outfit Mother and I chose for you to wear, Desiree’; after all, it fits in with your peasant personality. ” She left with a smug smile on her face.

By the time Marcus came to collect me I was dressed as Little Red Riding Hood and he was dressed entirely in black. “ The Big Bad Wolf at your service, Red Riding Hood. ” We both donned our masks and he proffered his arm. I knew Rochelle and Sheridan were in for a shock when they didn’t see Little Bo Peep in all her feminine finery.

We were announced and Rochelle and Sheridan shot daggers at us. Although they were conciliatory, I knew deep in their hearts they harbored vengeful feelings and I’d be in a vast amount of trouble without Marcus and Natalia to protect me. “ Now I’ll have to have dance cards changed, Marcus. ” Rochelle motioned to one of the servants who did as she was told. “ Desiree’, here’s a note, for your eyes only. ” The servant came back in record time and handed me a new dance card.

I slipped the note into my cape pocket to read when I had some privacy, then glanced at the revised dance card the servant handed to me; it was blank and I frowned as Marcus took it from my hand, then leaned close to my ear. “ Desiree’, meet me back here in an hour when my official duties are done and we’ll dance the night away. ” He gave me a small push. “ Go have some refreshments at the punch bowl. ”

I drank a cup of apple cider and read the note Rochelle had given to me. ‘Come dance with me, My Little Mermaid.’ It was signed Phillipe. I spied his undisguised face across the room as the orchestra fine-tuned their instruments. I tapped him on his Admiral’s insignia and lowered my mask. He twirled me round and round, then we glided into a waltz.

Time quickly slipped away and I forgot all about meeting Marcus. When he walked up to us, his eyes were blacker than midnight and jealousy reigned in his soul. “ So we meet again. I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening here with us. ” He cupped my elbow and soon I was lost in the total embrace of his love for me. The orchestra took a short break and Marcus clapped his hands to gain everyone’s attention. “ Ladies and gentlemen, as you all know by now, I have under my care a beautiful young lady named Desiree’ Terrance. A week from this coming Thursday, October 17th to be exact, she’ll turn 18. In her honor, I’m personally hosting a combined afternoon social and birthday party. Engraved invitations will be delivered shortly. ” Whistles and shouts came our way, but Marcus ignored them as we walked upstairs to the East turret for some fresh air. He removed my hood and the ruby pins which held my curls in place, and my hair flew wild and free in the

cool evening breeze. His kiss stirred the passions in my soul, and I melted into the strength of his body and love. Over to the left of us, a throat was cleared. Marcus kept me close to his side, his arm draped protectively around my shoulders.

Natalia came into view. “ Count Marcus. ” She nodded in deference to him. “ It would be unwise to stay out in the open where you can be seen; suspicious minds can foster evil ideas, compromising Desiree’s position in the household. ”

Marcus smiled and kissed me once again. “ Sleep well, my Love. ” He was gone in an instant.

“ Desiree’, you mustn’t let even a hint of impropriety be seen by those who don’t wish you well. ” Natalia ushered me into my quarters.

“ Who’d be jealous of my relationship with Marcus? ”

The minute I uttered those words, my door was flung wide open and Rochelle stormed in without bothering to knock. “ Young Lady, you are an unworthy guest in my house; impudent, rude, lacking in manners, and usurping my authority! ” She was madder than a hissing rattlesnake and twice as dangerous. “ How dare you wear a different costume than the one I had made specifically for you? Marcus told me he didn’t appreciate your fawning all over him, flirting unashamedly when there were other young women who wished to dance with him and then snubbing all the young suitors who wanted to share a bit of private time with you! You’re relegated to your rooms until I say otherwise! ” She slammed the door on her way out.

I was shocked, but understanding dawned crystal clear; Rochelle wanted me to be with anyone else but Marcus. Natalia had blended with the evening shadows, listening to Rochelle’s tirade. “ Desiree’, I’ll speak to the Count on your behalf. ”

I sighed as I weighed my options. “ No, Natalia. I’m sure Rochelle will tell him all sorts of lies, knowing he’ll confront me sooner or later. If he takes her word over mine, then he doesn’t really love me and I’ll give him back his ring, biding my time until I return to DuMond House. If he takes my word over hers, he’ll prove his love is pure and true and Castle Desiree’ will be my home forever. ”

“ Desiree’, you’re very wise for one so young. ” She kissed my forehead and stayed with me as I tossed and turned in my sleep. I paced back and forth in my rooms all of Sunday, refusing to eat or drink, while I waited for Marcus to come.

Late that evening I heard him urgently calling my name. He opened my door, tears streaming down the paleness of his cheeks. “ Is it true you no longer wish to see me? ”

I held out my arms and he laid his head on my breast. I stroked his hair and back, murmuring comforting words until he calmed down and gained a semblance of control. “ Marcus, look me in the eye; if I no longer wished to see you, I would have said so to your face. The truth is I love you and want to be with you always. ” He kissed me long and deep, and I tasted his love, assured of my rightful place by his side.

“ Why did you stay cooped up in your rooms all day? I sent you message after message, but Rochelle said you tore them up and threw them in her face, saying you wanted nothing more to do with me. ”

“ She told me that I was relegated to my quarters until she decided I’d been punished enough for my petulant behavior. ”

Marcus said, “ I’ll take care of Rochelle. ”

My fate was sealed for eternity. For the next ten days, Marcus and I spent every waking moment together, riding to the fields and winery to see how things were progressing. On the eve of my birthday party-social Marcus came to my quarters, bringing with him a most lovely dress. “ I’d be honored to have you wear my birthday present to you tomorrow, Desiree’. ” It was made of pure white satin, overlaid with white lace and luminous seed pearls embroidered in rosette patterns on the heart-shaped bodice, which ended with a flattering V waistline both in the front and back. The sleeves had three-quarter Victorian style cuffs adorned with silver lace and pearl brooches and were made of the same white lace that was on the bodice. The skirt was attached to the bodice and lined with an Italian cotton petticoat over crinoline and had a detachable hoop. The skirt itself was made with a generous amount of pure white satin that opened up in the center, showing the same stunning seed pearl rosettes along

with silver lace and pearl brooches. I held it in front of my body, knowing I was ready to make adult decisions in my life. Natalia hung it in my closet, and I was free to throw my arms around Marcus. “ This is such a stunning gown, Marcus. How can I ever thank you? ”

“ You already have by agreeing to marry me, Desiree’ . ”

I sighed. “ You haven’t even set an engagement date for us yet. ”

“ All in good time, Desiree’ , all in good time. ” He smiled. “ Just concentrate on tomorrow and all my plans will come to fruition. ”

He kissed my lips. “ Sleep well tonight, my Darling. I must go and see to the final details. ”

No sooner was Marcus gone than there was a knock on the door. Natalia let a short man with dark hair slip inside. “ I waited until the coast was clear. ” He handed her a small white box, barely opened the door, looked both ways, then left.

“ Natalia, who was that? ” She gave me the box and I removed the lid; nestled inside was Marcus’s ring, exactly as I’d pictured it. “ Next time you see your friend, tell him that it’s perfect. ”

“ I will, Desiree’ , and here’s my present to you. ” She handed me a wriststring handbag, beaded in pink pearlescent rosettes. The inside of the bag was lined in silver satin material, and she showed me the small side pocket, just big enough to hold the ring.

“ Thank you, Natalia. ” I hugged her tightly, then kissed her on both cheeks. It was still early enough for me to have a bath and servants brought steaming water to my room, releasing the fragrance of lavender bathsalts. I relaxed in the scented liquid, floating amidst dreams of eventually becoming engaged to Marcus. I peacefully slept away my last hours of being 17 and awoke excited and refreshed, an adult of 18 years! The morning hours were whittled away as make-up was applied, my hair styled with ringlets cascading down my neck, and I was finally dressed in the birthday gown Marcus had given to me.

Natalia gave me an exquisite cloisonne’ perfume bottle shaped in the letter ‘D’ and filled with an exotic scent. A short note was attached; ‘Desiree’ , I

wanted this to be your first gift of the day. Please wear the Lavender and Lace for me. Love always, Marcus.’ I spritzed a small amount on my wrists, and the heady smell of summer flowers enveloped me. I slipped on shoes that matched my beaded bag and we walked to a set of stairs I was unfamiliar with. “ Marcus will meet you at the landing, and I’ll see you inside later. ”

Marcus waited for me, dressed in a black mourning coat and black trousers, his polished gold cufflinks glittering as they reflected light from the overhead chandelier. We turned left on the landing and the stairway widened out, leading down to the grand ballroom where my birthday party-social was to be held. When we entered, everyone sang Happy Birthday to me, then clapped and cheered. Waiters passed around sparkling wine to the guests and Marcus spoke. “ Welcome, all. My hope is that you’ll remember and comment upon this special afternoon in the years to come as you drink your fill of Desiree’s Passion. ” He raised his glass in a toast. “ To Desiree’ on her 18th birthday; may you receive what you want from life today, but more importantly, what you need. ” Marcus and I clinked glasses and drank. A servant walked to where we stood together and whispered in his ear. “ I’m told that the luncheon buffet is ready. Please follow me into the dining room. ”

Tables were loaded with mountains of food, enough to feed an army. On the 1st table were huge platters of Antipasti Italiani which included zucchini, eggplant, carrots, artichokes, sweet peppers, and mushrooms marinated in vinegrette-like sauce and separate plates of various types of olives and cheeses.

The Bruschetta was oven-toasted day-old bread topped with fresh diced tomatoes, a dash of olive oil, garlic, oregano and other spices. On the same table was Insalata di pesce/di frutti di mare, a cold seafood salad that contained boiled squid, octopus, mussels, and clams in a vinegrette sauce.

On the second table were different kinds of meat. Prosciutto e melone: sliced ham and fresh melon, dentice: seabream, gamberi: large shrimp, lonza: pork loin, lumache: snails, montone: mutton, palombaccio: wild pigeon, and saltimbocca alla Romana: thin veal slices with fresh sage and ham, fried in butter and white wine.

The 3rd table was filled with vegetable and fruit dishes. Asparagi: asparagus, barbabietole: red beets, ceci: chick peas, cetrioli: cucumbers, fagiolini:

greenbeans, lenticchie: lentils, patatine novelle: new potatoes, peperonata: bell peppers, onions, and tomatoes marinated in garlic oil, manicotti: baked pasta tubes filled with spinach and cheese, albicocche: apricots, aranci: oranges, datteri: dates, fragole: strawberries, melagrane: pomegranates, pesche: peaches, susine: plums, uve: grapes, visciola: wild cherries, anacardi: cashews, arachide: peanuts, and avellane: hazelnuts.

The 4th table was for desserts. Panforte: flat, hard cakes made with almonds, hazelnuts, honey and citron, pasticcini da te': teacakes and petit fours, sfogliatelle: small pastries filled with custard, sweetened ricotta cheese and candied fruit, tortina di marmellata: jam tarts, and tartufi di cioccolata: candy balls made of a chocolate, coffee and egg mixture.

Gracing a table by itself was a huge savarin: a ring-mold cake, soaked in rum, its center filled with fruit, and topped with whipped cream.

We ate and drank, then I opened gift after gift, displaying them to everyone, but what imprinted itself in my mind was an elaborate silver tea service on a matching ornate tray from my Uncle Joshua and an unusual bottle of French perfume called Night Blooming Jasmine from Phillippe. I read the card he sent with it; 'My Little Mermaid, I want to wish you nothing but happiness on your 18th birthday. My heart is heavy with remorse for not being able to attend the festivities, but with the testing season fast approaching I must study harder than ever to pass so I can remain at university. God willing, we'll see each other over the Christmas holidays. When you wear this scent, remember that I love you.'

I had every intention of writing to thank him, but my circumstances changed in a split second. "Desiree', close your eyes to receive your final presents." Something was placed on top of my head and my fingers were curled around long, slender stalks as I heard many oohhs and aahhs.

Marcus squeezed my hands between his and I peeked at him through sheer Italian lace. Within my hands I held a bouquet of wine red roses and white baby's breath. "Marry me right here, right now, Desiree'."

I gave him the only answer I had prepared for. "Yes, Marcus, I'll be your wife from here until eternity." He turned me to face a tall man in clerical robes.

"Desiree', long ago you were just a dream and a prayer. This day is much more than hallowed because my dream has come true and my prayers have

been answered. Through the pressures of the here and now and the uncertainties of the future, I promise to be faithful; to guide and protect you with my deepest love, my fullest devotion, and my tenderest care, even laying down my life if need be. God has been generous; I have in no way earned His blessings, especially the one that entrusts me with the free gift of your life. Today I give you the present of me. With deepest joy I receive you into my life; to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish 'till death do us part. ” He slipped his Mother’s ring on the third finger of my left hand. “ I, Marcus Canossa, take you, Desiree’ Terrance, to be my wedded wife. ”

Marcus held his breath as I opened my wristbag and brought forth the ring that had been made expressly for him; it was a square-cut black onyx with diamonds around the outer edge and blood-red rubies in the center, marking out the letter ‘M’. I slipped it on the 3rd finger of his left hand. “ I, Desiree’ Terrance, take you Marcus Canossa, to be my wedded husband. ” Marcus beamed and loving thoughts flowed for everyone to hear. “ When my Uncle Joshua brought me to Castle Desiree’, deepest sorrow filled my heart and soul because I felt all alone in this world again. As I stand by your side today Marcus, I’m enriched with love’s power and joy, elements that have been missing from my life. To you I pledge my faithfulness. I will ever strengthen, help, comfort, and encourage you. Whither thou goest I will go, whither thou lodgest I will lodge, thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. I accept the gracious gift of you; to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, ‘till death do us part. ”

The reverend finished the ceremony by saying, “ Count Marcus, you may lift the veil that separates you from your wife and seal the bonds of holy matrimony. ”

Marcus kissed me soundly on the lips, in full view of everyone and they became witnesses to the biggest surprise Fredericksburg had ever seen. “ Now is the time for us to have the first dance as man and wife. ” He led me into the Ballroom and a string quartet played the Vienese Waltz. He fit my hand in his and guided me across the floor. Time drifted away; we were the music, our bodies a dance of love in motion, gliding with no effort involved. Marcus whispered in my ear, “ It won’t be long until our wedded pledge of love makes us one in heart, soul, body, and blood for all

eternity.” He clapped his hands, gaining everyone’s attention. The waiters brought glasses of Desiree’s Passion for each of the guests. Marcus raised his glass and proposed a toast. “ To the most beautiful and desirable woman in Fredericksburg. My love is only for my new bride, Desiree’! ”

We drank the sparkling wine and more was poured. I offered a toast of my own. “ To my husband Marcus, the man I have waited for all my life. ” We entwined our arms to drink and liquid happiness seeped from my eyes. “ I’ll love you forever, Marcus. ”

The early afternoon hours had given way to late evening. Marcus took my hand and winked. “ Family and friends, it’s close to midnight; Desiree’ and I will take our leave of you now, but please continue with the reception. ”

I thought we’d share his quarters as man and wife, but I was wrong. The bridal suite was my fantasy come true. The canopied bed was made of rosewood, its strongly marked grain giving off a reddish hue. The sheets were pure white satin, cool and inviting, the cover a deep burgundy that matched the canopy. “ Oh Marcus, how did you know these are my favorite colors? ”

He laughed. “ I have my ways of finding out all I need to know. ” He handed me a goblet of wine. “ A private toast to you, Desiree’. You’ve managed to capture what no other woman has or ever will; all my love. ” We drank the intoxicating cordial and Marcus held me close to his body.

“ Turn around, Desiree’. ” He clasped a necklace around my throat; the mirror showed a delicate 24 carat gold serpentine chain supporting an heirloom black opal attached by carved ivory fittings. The opal became transparent as I held it to the light and I saw a tiny ruby suspended in the middle. “ There’s a legend behind this one of a kind necklace. ” I nodded my head and he continued. “ The forces of Good and Evil decided to have a competition one day to see who could gain the most souls for their side; whoever won would have bragging rights and one drop of his blood to be suspended in an elegant necklace which would be displayed for the entire universe to see. If Good won out, then there would be eternal daylight forever, and if Evil won out there would be eternal darkness. They gave themselves one month and each tried to outdo the other by any means necessary. At the end of the month Good said he had managed to bring 1000 souls to his side. Since Evil wasn’t allowed to lie about his numbers, he also

stated that he'd brought 1000 souls to his side. God was the judge in all of this and since there was no clear winner, He took a drop of rubied blood from both Good and Evil and spun it into a suspended bead, which is the eternal heartbeat of sunrise and sunset, morning and evening in balance and harmony forever. ” There was warmth and love in his kiss and we tasted each other's sweet nectar as our tongues danced a tangoed waltz that only the two of us would ever share. “ You are my eternal sunrise and sunset, Desiree’ . ”

Marcus slowly turned me around, his hands deftly unbuttoning my wedding day/ birthday gown, bending towards my neck while pushing my curls aside. His lips came into contact with my flesh, leaving me breathless with unknown desires. My body trembled in that one embraced moment because I didn't know what he expected from me. His exploring fingertips caressed my exposed back from my shoulders down to my waist, then he slipped the silk material the rest of the way off my body; it fell in a soft whisper to the floor, landing at my feet. Marcus held my hand as I blushed hotly under his steady gaze, wearing nothing but my undergarments.

” Marcus? ” My voice cracked with nervousness and my shaking hands made it impossible for me to undo any fastenings. His fingers quickly went about their duties and I assumed that this wasn't his first experience with unlacing corsets. His eyes never left mine as he removed the rest of my clothing. My naked glory, which no man had ever seen or touched, was displayed for my loving husband.

He drew me close, stroking my back as his lips and tongue leisurely explored my mouth at great length, then his bruising passion demanded that I give my very essence to him. Tidal waves of delight coursed through my body, leaving me with no resistance to his physical advances. I savored all the sweetness his mouth had to offer, my breathing coming in short gasps as the minutes ticked by. When he withdrew from my lips, I felt abandoned, all alone in the world. “ Marcus, don't leave me like this, ” I moaned low in my throat.

“ Now is the time I'll feast on you, my Darling Desiree’ . ” He carried me to our marriage bed and laid me down ever so gently, as if I were a breakable porcelain doll. His hands journeyed to my breasts, tenderly caressing, rubbing, and massaging both of them. His mouth and tongue nibbled, tasting and teasing, enjoying each minute. My swollen nipples were rigid, but

hardened into rocks as he sucked on them. Shockwaves of pleasure moved swiftly through my molten veins as Marcus pinched them between his thumbs and index fingers. “ Your nipples are like a fine vintage wine, the flavor of fresh strawberries. ” Marcus sighed. “ I could do this forever. ”

My belly glowed hotter than the blazing noontime sun as his languid touch added fuel to the lava fires at the core of my body. His caresses felt like butterfly wings, barely touching, knowing full well that my passion called for more. His fiery mouth and tongue bathed my inner thighs, as he murmured bonding words of love to me. His hands swiftly parted my legs, my body his to do with as he pleased. I felt no shame as I allowed his fingers free access to touch me in places no man had been privy to before. He slowly slid one finger inside my slippery body, while his tongue drew circles around my nipple, teasing it to taughtness; there were no thoughts to be had, only sheer feelings of enjoyment and delight. When Marcus slipped two of his strong slender fingers into the cavity of my being, I matched the rhythm of his slow sensual motions.

His reverence was focused on my reactions. “ My Delicious Desiree’, your first joy is the physical gratification of me making love to you. ” His sweet mouth and tongue swirled shockwave kisses of desire on my moistness, the sensitive spot that craved his touch. “ Do you want more? ” His voice was personified pleasure.

“ Yes, Marcus, make love to me. ” I thought of nothing else.

“ You are so tasty Desiree’, I am going to eat you up ” His hands spread my womanhood far apart as he thrust his hungry tongue into my body, causing sensational explosions to my nerve endings.

“ Oh God, Marcus! ” I screamed his name as my body jerked and spasmed in utter fulfillment. When my breathing slowed, I asked, “ Is this what it feels like to become a woman? ”

“ You’re not a complete woman until you lose your virginity, my Sweet Wife. ” His eyes were dark with pentup desire. “ Do you have any idea what a man looks like unclothed? ”

“No, Marcus, you’re the first man, the only man I’ll see. ”

He touched my cheek. “ Then you’ll have the honor of undressing me. ” I helped him out of his mourning coat and he kissed me tenderly. “ I never want you to be shy with me, Desiree’; as husband and wife we must promise to give each other only pleasure, never pain. ”

The windows of my soul showed him how much I loved and trusted him. Boldness pulsed in my bloodstream and I unbuttoned the white silk shirt he wore, kissing him where his skin was bare. His chest was smooth and pale, his nipples reddish brown in color. He read my thoughts. “ Feel free to touch and kiss me anywhere you choose. That’s how your love for me will deepen and expand into other areas of our lives. ”

I removed his shirt. His back was broad at the shoulders and narrowed at his waist. My hands came into full body contact as I rubbed his chest, enjoying the way his skin responded to my fingertips. I melted into the depths of his eyes, wanting to pleasure him in the same way he had pleased me. I breathed in the scent of his skin as his nipples yielded to the pressure of my mouth, exciting me. He removed his trousers and underwear and I felt no shame in gazing upon his nakedness. Majestic in his magnificence, he was a lion king wanting his lioness. The desire I had for Marcus left me with no inhibitions. I was greedy for him to be inside of me and let my mouth explore and worship at his male temple. The taste and feel of his hardness drove me to new heights of passion, but it wasn’t enough. I slowly removed my mouth from him, his maleness still throbbing hard and warm. My emotions and body were in a state of strong arousal as the tip of my tongue travel lightly on his lips.

Passions and wild emotions over which he had no control were triggered inside of my lion king. He wouldn’t be stopped in his pursuit or denied the conjugal rights to his lioness. With gentle roughness he pulled my legs apart and stared directly into my eyes as he plunged his swollen manhood into my woman’s virgin body, spewing forth his seed. I pierced the night with all the pain and pleasure he brought forth in me, as consuming desire crashed over me in shimmering waves. “ Desiree’, we are truly one in heart, soul, body, and blood. Man and wife, forever and always. ”

We held each other in the afterglow of love. Marcus moved off the bed for a minute, then helped me sit up. He had a huge smile on his face as he handed me a glass of Desiree’s Passion. “ Relax and sleep. ” I drank all of it, kissed my wonderful husband, and fell fast asleep in his arms.

Chapter 22

I woke with a start, knowing there'd be hell to pay when my father came upstairs, ranting and raving about how I'd missed the boat to France, but I was surprised to see the same black-robed priest and small group of people that Bethanie had sent, plus reinforcements hovering over my bed. I was angry at their invasion of my privacy and managed to slip past them and into the protective arms of my beautiful cousin, Annelle. " My father will be most displeased if we're late to board Goddess of the Sea! "

She held me tight and patted my back, while tears streamed down her face. " Cousin, it's wonderful that you're awake, but your memories aren't relevant to this present day and time. " She touched my cheek in a motherly way. " Your confusion comes from your illness; we're in the Lorraine Region of France, inside my father's house. "

She turned my face to the glass windowpanes. I stared at the grounds and gardens, but didn't recognize anything that came into focus. " It's true, the lawns don't resemble the fields and orchards surrounding my father's house in Springfield, but what of this room? " I was perplexed.

An older gentleman with snow white hair and bushy eyebrows moved towards us. " Niece, we fashioned it after your sister's bedroom, and have kept it in loving memory of her. " I laughed outloud. Bethanie was quite the comedienne; she'd hate this room as much as she hated the one I'd designed for myself at home. " Bethanie, what's wrong? Have you no fond feelings for your dearly departed twin, Desiree'? "

I rolled my eyes in his direction. " I'm not dead yet, although I'm sure Bethanie wishes I was in my grave, buried and forgotten. " I paused for emphasis. " She's accomplished that deed by having all of you call me by her name, instead of by my given name of Desiree'. "

I positioned myself between Annelle and the window. " Cousin, who are all these people? " She was the only one I trusted to tell me the truth. She introduced me to her parents, my Uncle Joshua and Aunt Madeliane. They were all smiles and I was happy to finally make their acquaintance.

I felt hands on my shoulders and heard a male voice whisper Bethanie's name in my ear. I turned around and faced the young actor with dark curly hair who couldn't keep his lines straight. "Don't you dare call me by her name!" He dropped his hands, then backed away as the door opened. A tall stately lady accompanied by a bald-headed gentleman entered the crowded room, adding to the overwhelming disorder.

"Desiree', we heard you all the way down the hall." She gathered my hands in hers. "My name is Valera and I've been treating you with herbal remedies since your accident in Coltsfoot Canyon, just a few days before you married Count Marcus."

The man I had yelled at grimaced and folded his arms across his chest. I drew in a deep breath, feeling sick to the depths of my soul. "Annelle, is this true?" She nodded yes. "Why don't I have any memories of these events?"

The bald-headed man spoke up. "Mistress Canossa." He stared intently at me, but I certainly didn't know that name.

Annelle whispered, "That's your married name, Desiree'; please listen to what the good doctor has to say."

"Mistress Canossa, have you no memories of my earlier visits?" I shook my head no. "Ah, well; my name is Dr. Pierre Franco. I'm a medical doctor, but have been studying how the human brain works in conjunction with the physical body. Now to your question of no memories; much of the time we don't know specific causes or reasons as to why the mind retrogrades. Some men of medicine speculate that the brain does it in order to protect itself from excruciating traumas and episodes it's not ready to face or comprehend; in your case, it's probably due to lack of recuperation time from your accident, and lowered resistance to outside stimuli. Mistress Canossa, your husband has given me his permission to help you, until you're well in mind, body and spirit." I narrowed my eyes to mere slits, while Dr. Franco smiled benignly. "First of all, I'd do nothing without your permission; a patient's cooperation is most important in these types of matters. I'll await your joint decision." To my relief Dr. Franco left and I had one less person to contend with.

"Bethanie, as your husband, I only want what's best for you;

please allow the doctor help. ” The man who called himself my husband gently took my hand in his.

My demeanor was sweet as poisoned mead. “ I’ll never speak to you again if you insist on calling me by my sister’s name and furthermore, I’ll only do what’s in my own best interest...with or without your esteemed husbandly consent. ” Would my own father stoop so low as to marry me off to a man I neither knew or loved? The thought made me physically ill and I fainted into the strong arms of my husband. He carried me to the bed amidst smothering attention, and I came close to pitching a Bethanie fit. “ I can’t deal with these issues right now. ”

My husband said, “ I know how difficult this situation is so I’m going to leave you in peace, but I’ll return later to discuss certain issues in private... Desiree’ . ” He looked me straight in the eye and scowled. “ I hope you can muster enough respect to call me by my given name as well, and in case your memory fails, it’s Marcus. ”

His name was a bitter pill, but I thought he’d appreciate honesty along with the effort of good manners. “ Marcus, I’m truly sorry that I have no concrete memories of you or our life together as husband and wife, but there’s no way I’d ever pretend to be Bethanie for you or any other man on this planet. ”

Marcus bit his tongue, turned on his heel and left, followed by my uncle and aunt. I asked Annelle to stay behind, and Valera remained with her. “ Desiree’ , I’m going to explain the seriousness of your circumstances to you. ” Annelle put her arms around my shoulders. “ Your cousin knows more than anyone else what’s transpired in the last few years of your life. ”

“ Years? ”

“ Yes, Desiree’ . Today is Saturday, March 7th, 1877, and that makes you 19 years of age. ” Valera told me her version of the missing years and Annelle confirmed the validity of what she said, but I dismissed the story as too farfetched to be true. “ Don’t let your guard down with anyone except Annelle or me. ”

Alarm bells went off in my mind as a distinct voice demanded I trust no-one except Dr. Franco. I was to confide in him about any conversations I had with Valera, Annelle, or Marcus.

I threw off the covers, intending to go visit Dr. Franco, but when I stood up, my knees buckled underneath me. “Desiree’, your system needs nourishment.” Valera handed me a tall glass of red liquid. “This is sweet nectar of the gods.” The taste was horrendous, reminding me of when I bit my lip, but I drank it all, and immediately had energy to spare. She continued. “As a vampire, your body cannot manufacture blood or nutrients like a normal person; without another’s life force, you only have weeks to live.” The thought was ludicrous and I didn’t reply. How could I be a vampire? The reflection I saw in the mirror showed a young lady who was young, vital, and healthy, with an alabaster glow to her skin, and pinkness in her cheeks.

I was tired of remaining in my bedclothes and walked to the closet, staring at hangers filled with the kind of dresses that only Bethanie would wear; pale washed-out colors with frilly cuffs and collars. I slammed the door, feeling aggitated and at my wits’ end. “Annelle, could you lend me something until I have a new wardrobe made?”

“I have one gown that does you justice, and I’ll return with it shortly.” It was dark green with deep red stripes from the collarless neckline to the hem of the belling skirt and suited me to perfection. “Valera presented this gift to you on the eve of your wedding to Marcus.”

“Thank you, Valera.” I pecked her cheek, then smiled in pleasure as the dress molded itself to my form.

Annelle said, “I spoke to Marcus in the hallway and he gave his permission for you to travel into town with me so you could purchase materials for new dresses.”

“Bah! I’m always needing permission from the men in my life; first my father and now a husband I don’t even know.”

We walked into the hallway and were met at the top of the stairs by Marcus. “Annelle, the glow of impending motherhood becomes you.” He grabbed my arm. “Desiree’.” His manner was condescending and I saw Bethanie written in his eyes. “I’m only allowing you outside this house because Dr. Franco says it will do you some good.”

“ There’s no need to treat me as if I were a recalcitrant child, Marcus. ”
Sparks of anger flitted in the air.

“ As my wife and my responsibility, I’ll say what has to be said, whether you agree or not. ” Had my opinions always taken a backseat to his own throughout our entire relationship?

I wasn’t in a happy mood as he helped me into the carriage, but brightened considerably when the driver let us out in front of a fashionable dress shop. The seamstress took my measurements, then Annelle and I spent hours deciding on materials, trims, buttons, bows, styles, and accessories.

“ Madame Canossa, we will have everything done and delivered to you in two weeks. ” The owner smiled and we left.

We strolled down the street towards the outskirts of town and stopped in front of a massive stoneworked cathedral. A man in priestly garb came down the steps and took Annelle’s hand in greeting. “ And how is the mother to be? ” He smiled in my direction as a shadow crossed his countenance, but his voice was kind. “ Miss Desiree’, I never forget a face as lovely as yours. God is good in granting us the privilege of meeting each other again. ” I stared closely, trying to wriggle a faint acknowledgement of blank years. “ Annelle has filled me in on your circumstances, Dear Child. ” He motioned us inside the church. The pews were filled with faithful parishioners waiting their turn for confessions with the officiating Cardinal and Annelle sat with them, while Father Quimper led me to a small private chapel off the main portion. “ Miss Desiree’, have you any confessions to make before I pray for your soul and the swift return of your memory? ”

“ Just for an overall forgiveness until I remember the last three years of my life. ”

He patted my hand. “ You’re right, of course; God knows and understands all circumstances, whether we do or not. ” We knelt before a polished rosewood cross and Father Quimper prayed for me in words of praise and supplication to his God, although I got the distinct impression it wasn’t the God I knew. I glanced at my watch when he finished; over an hour had passed since we got down on our knees, but I barely remembered a word he said. He helped me up and I sat in a comfortable chair near his desk while he poured clear liquid from a small wine decanter into a crystal goblet and handed it to me. “ This holy water will cleanse your heart and soul, thus

allowing God to attune your will to his.” It was sweet and satisfying, unlike what Valera had given me to drink earlier. His eyes lit up when I mentioned speaking with Dr. Franco. “ He’s an excellent physician, a doctor you can trust to restore your memories, so your life can be fulfilled in all ways. ”

By the time we finished the afternoon had given way to twilight, and the carriage waited for us on the cobbled street. Father Quimper kissed Annelle and me on the cheek before we left. “ Godspeed and many blessings to both of you; please come back and visit at your convenience. ”

My mind whirled with myriad thoughts and feelings on the way home, but I gained a semblance of peace as Annelle rested her head on my shoulder and slept like a baby.

Marcus stood in the doorway as we arrived. He nodded to Annelle, but his words were aimed at me. “ Desiree’, we must speak in private right now. ” He guided me towards the knot gardens. “ I can’t postpone traveling to Fredericksburg any longer; I’m needed there by tomorrow evening. ”

Thoughts I had no intention of saying tumbled out of my mouth. “ Going into town with Annelle has afforded me revelations about my predicament. While we were there, she introduced me to the presiding priest, Father Quimper. He gave a glowing report about Dr. Franco and the people that he’s helped. I’ll agree to accompany you to Fredericksburg if the good doctor can come with us. ”

Marcus smiled like a cat who’s swallowed a canary. “ I’ll make all the arrangements, then wire my stepsister and stepmother, telling them when to expect us. I’ll even make sure your new wardrobe is delivered to Castle Desiree’. ”

As he left, a servant brought a light repast to our room. I wasn’t hungry, but tired of being in close proximity to Marcus. A knock sounded on the door and the servant opened it to Dr. Franco.

“ Good evening, Mistress Canossa. Your husband told me of your plans to leave in the morning and I’ll gladly accompany you to Castle Desiree’, but first I require a short private session with you this evening to learn a bit more about your memories. Please have a seat. ” He pointed to a straightback wooden chair set near the wall and he turned another one around so he could

face me directly. He removed a black circular medallion with a glowing golden star situated in its center. “ Do you know anything of hypnosis, Mistress Canossa? ”

“ I’m not familiar with that term. ”

“ It’s a way of being able to take a person back into their mind’s eye and retrieve lost memories. You’ll tell me accounts of events and happenings and I’ll relay them to you when you awaken from the hypnotic trance. Do you trust me to do that? ”

“ Yes, Dr. Franco. ”

“ Focus your eyes on the medallion’s star and free your mind of all thoughts. ” Soon I heard nothing but the doctor’s voice. “ Desiree’, repeat my instructions to you. ”

“ I’ll only listen to the advice that you, Father Quimper, and Sheridan and Rochelle Canossa give to me. Everyone else wishes to do me harm. ”

“ And what else? ”

“ I’ll treat Marcus with respect, kindness and love. ”

A soft rapping came at the door and I opened my eyes. Marcus poked his head in. “ Doctor? ”

“ Count Marcus, it would be in your wife’s best interest for Father Quimper to come along with us as her spiritual confessor. ” He turned back to me. “ Mistress Canossa, you’ll follow a strict regimine of care and guidance, thus assuring the return of your physical health and mental well being. ” He kissed the back of my hand. “ I’ll see both of you in the early morning hours. ”

Marcus and I were alone and an overwhelming urge enveloped me.

“ I apologize for my terrible attitude. Dr. Franco says my mind has been confused and I’ve taken out my frustrations on you. Can you forgive me? ”

“ Of course. ” He kissed my lips and hugged me close; against my own free will I accepted his affections. “ Did he mention how long it will be until

your true memories return? ”

“ He gave me no specifics, but said that fresh air, sunshine and people who truly love me is the best of all remedies. ”

“ My prayer is that in God’s own time, you’ll be restored to your former self and we can continue a joyous life together. ” He turned to leave and I felt an emptiness inside.

“ Marcus, please stay with me tonight as my husband. ” I wondered where those words had come from.

“ From your ruby lips to my listening ears, Precious Wife. I’ll return shortly with some wine so we can celebrate a new beginning. ”

I hastily slipped into a nightgown, but felt suffocated by uncontrollable events. Cool night air enticed me and I walked to the window; it was stuck, but gave way with a final jerk that left a long bleeding scrape on my right wrist. I was fascinated by the red liquid rolling down my arm, but startled when Marcus crept up behind me. “ Let me kiss the pain away. ” He licked the congealing blood off my arm, then sucked with wild abandon on the original cut, lifting his eyes to mine as if he knew all the hidden secrets my mind wouldn’t reveal.

“ Yes, Desiree’, heart of my heart and blood of my blood. ” His actions revolted me and although I wanted to question him, alarm bells went off in my head. He handed me a small glass of white wine. It was sweet and potent and I yawned, then climbed into bed. Marcus kissed my cheek and I slept like one of the dead.

Sunday, March 8th, 1877

Morning came and Marcus held me tenderly in his arms, his face to my back. When I tried to move he held me even tighter, and murmured in his sleep...

‘the darkness of your secrets
comes clear in light of day
taken from your bodied blood
the hunter is the prey’

His dream sounded like a cheap dimestore novel. I tried to sit up, but my head and neck throbbed with each heartbeat. “ Are you feeling a bit under the weather this morning, Desiree’? Dr. Franco said that’s to be expected. ” A sharp rapping came at the door. Marcus didn’t bother to ask who it might be, but said, “ Come in. ”

Dr. Franco carried in a tray with croissants, coffee, and juice. He handed me a large glass, filled to the brim with bright red liquid. “ Drink up, Desiree’ . This will give you strength for your journey. ” It tasted like strawberries and cherries, yet had an underlying hint of saltiness that left me refreshed and revived.

“ Count Marcus, the carriage awaits your presence. ”

Dr. Franco gave us some privacy so we could dress. I finished and walked to the door. “ Where do you think you’re going , Desiree’? ”

“ To say good-bye to Annelle, my Aunt and Uncle. ”

Marcus clamped my arms and hissed in my ear, “ I already said your farewells for you, Desiree’ . From now on, you’ll obey me exclusively, with no ifs, ands, or buts to mar the air. ”

I wasn’t physically strong enough to challenge his authority, but anger seethed within my heart at the 180 degree change in his attitude. I was my own person and had no need of being treated like a second class citizen by a man I barely knew.

As we traveled to Fredericksburg, Marcus rambled on and on about his rules and regulations. I was bored by his prattle and dozed off. When I woke, my neck ached and I was drained of energy and resolve.

“ We’re home, Desiree’ . ” Marcus grinned at my suffering, then without another word, carried me to our quarters and laid me on the bed. “ Being docile and compliant suits you, Desiree’ . ” I couldn’t even muster one iota of hatred as he undressed me and perused my nakedness. A cold glint came into his eyes, causing me to shiver. “ Do you think I’d ravage you against your will? ” He swiftly helped me into my bedclothes and put me under the covers. “ There are many things I am and many things that cross my mind at this moment, but I’m not a savage beast. ” He strode out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

I slept until dawn's early light. A soft tapping sounded at my door and Dr. Franco came in. He set a tray of food on my dresser. "Count Marcus told me you've been feeling poorly." He handed me a glass of red liquid. "This is filled with vitamins and minerals to nourish and strengthen your body." As I drank, two ladies entered my room. "Desiree', I'd like to introduce you to the Count's stepmother and stepsister; Rochelle and Sheridan Canossa."

"Welcome to your new home, Desiree'." Rochelle kissed my cheek and Sheridan followed suit. "Let us know if there's anything we can do for you." They seemed nice enough; straightforward, unlike my husband. "I'm sure you're wondering why Marcus hasn't come to see you this morning. He's gone to check on the fields and the winery for the next few days, giving us time to plan for his birthday celebration." I racked my brains but couldn't remember the day or year he was born. "His party will be held on Saturday, March 28th, and he'll be 27 years old." I sighed. "You won't have to do anything except be healthy enough to attend the birthday ball."

"Eat everything Desiree', then get dressed and we'll have our first of many daily sessions." Dr. Franco, Sheridan, and Rochelle left me alone and I ate my fill of saugages, eggs and biscuits.

The only dress I wanted to wear was being cleaned, so I yanked one of Bethanie's non-descript gowns from its hanger and as I did, a packet of letters scattered across my feet; they were all addressed to me at Castle Desiree' in Fredericksburg. The postmark was from Paris, France, and the name of the sender was Phillipe Grenoble; neither one meant anything to me, but maybe if I read them my memories would resurface. By the time I straightened them out, Dr. Franco had returned to my room. "Are you feeling better, Desiree'?"

"Yes. All my aches and pains have gone away and I'm bursting with energy."

"After our session, we'll meet with Father Quimper. He's been visiting the priests in Fredericksburg and will return shortly." Dr. Franco removed the same medallion he had used earlier on me from his coat pocket. "Please sit and let your mind drift into the center of the star." I did and when he snapped his fingers, I felt refreshed and happy. "What did we discuss, Desiree'?"

“ Memories of what happened before I reached the age of 10. But why talk of what I know, Doctor? ”

“ Although I have various reports of your family history from other sources such as your husband, aunt, uncle, and cousin, I wanted you to fill in the blanks. This way your mind will grow accustomed to retrieving hidden memories from the last 3 years as well. ”

That made perfect sense to me.

Chapter 23

After a light lunch, Dr. Franco and I walked down a long hallway towards the center of the castle where Father Quimper stood at a bolted doorway, waiting for us to arrive. “ Miss Desiree’, you are indeed a welcome sight. ” He kissed me on both cheeks.

Dr. Franco and the priest shook hands. “ Mistress Canossa, I must leave now and write up my notes, but I think this afternoon with Father Quimper will do you good. ” He bowed and left.

“ Do you enjoy history, Desiree’? ” I nodded yes and he inserted a big brass key into the door lock. It clicked and he slid back the bolt to reveal a flight of stoneworked stairs leading down into the bowels of the castle.

“ The original name of this building was Monasterium Damnare’ or Monastery of the Damned; the Count’s father renamed it Castle Desiree’ in honor of his new wife. ” He continued. “ Down these stairs and underneath the monastery proper are galleries. ” I anticipated viewing religious artwork, but the tunneled passageway at the bottom was lined on both sides with limestone and mortar; extending along the narrow sides were recessed vaults that housed coffins. I shivered, but Father Quimper didn’t seem the least bit disturbed. He pointed to doors fastened with either iron or wood. “ As you can plainly see, there were few who could afford private tombs and these open ones belonged to paupers. ” I peeked in morbid curiosity through iron bars; some caskets had arms and legs sticking out of their rotted seams and I quickly turned my eyes away. Father Quimper ushered me further into a cavernous room. “ These used to be the cloistered walls when the monetary was first built and where we stand was the central courtyard open to fresh air

and sunshine. ”

My eyes strayed to the damp and gloomy upper walls and beheld grotesque stonecast monsters staring back at me; at each corner were four human heads with their mouths wide open, but in place of tongues, giant intertwined snakes protruded to form one writhing body. Holly leaves with thorny branches crowned each head, and fat globs of red blood dripped down the faces. I turned my own face into Father Quimper’s robes, while an unknown dread tingled in my long forgotten memories.

“ Desiree’, there’s nothing here to harm or hurt you; these gargoyles were originally designed to serve as rainwater spouts and some said they scared away evil spirits. ” He held me close until I calmed down. “ My Dear, I had no idea you’d react as you did. I mainly wished to show you the small sacristy where the original monks worshipped. God’s soothing presence is there to unburden your heart and bring you peace. ”

We entered through an archway and glorious light filtered through a rose window; it reminded me of Dr. Franco’s hypnotic medallion, but the central golden star was surrounded by red-stained glass. Padded kneelers provided comfort as prayers were said. “ When you talk to God, keep your eyes open and focused on His window, Desiree’. ”

We remained less than thirty minutes, but when I rose, my legs were stiff and my neck ached as if many hours had passed. “ Father Quimper, I’m not feeling very well. Would you walk me to my room so I can rest? ”

He saw me safely to my quarters and after my nap, Sheridan brought a meal of thick beef stew, crusty bread and a big glass of sweet red liquid prescribed by Dr. Franco. As nourishment circulated throughout my system, my energy and stamina returned. “ Desiree’, how did your meeting with Father Quimper go? ”

“ It was strange walking past the catacombs and mummified corpses. ” I shook my head.

“ Is that all he showed you? ” Sheridan seemed very interested in my reply.

“ No, we went to the inner sanctuary where I prayed to God, but when I got up my whole body ached. ”

“ So did mine the first time, but the body adjusts after much practice. ” She showed me her calloused knees.

“ How many times do you pray each day? ”

“ At least three and sometimes more. Father Quimper says it’s good for the soul who wishes to get to heaven, but that’s not the main reason I came to visit you. Marcus has chosen A Night in Old Alexandria for his birthday theme, complete with costumes and ceremonies. ”

“ That sounds unique, Sheridan. ” Her eyes were feverish and she went on about the festivities as if I might decide I had better things to do. Against my better judgment I said, “ I’ll definitely attend and see that Marcus has a memorable birthday. ”

“ That’s all I wanted to hear from you, Desiree’ . ” She kissed my cheek and left me to my own devices.

Thoughts of letters danced in my head and I locked the door for ultimate privacy. I slit the top envelope and unfolded my own familiar stationary; the page was dated Wednesday, September 18th, 1875, and written by me to Phillipe Grenoble in Paris.

‘Dearest Phillipe,

I know it’s been quite some time since we wrote to one another, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t thought of you with a great deal of fondness. Many things have happened in my life and now I’m living in Fredericksburg at Castle Desiree’ with Count Marcus Canossa and his family.

I don’t know how much time you might have off from your university studies, but I’d love to have you visit me. In fact, the harvest season balls will be starting soon and I’ve often wondered if you could dance as well as you tell a story or walk the decks of Goddess of the Sea. The first official masked ball will be held here at the castle on Saturday, October 5th.

I would be more than pleased if you could attend.

Your Little Mermaid,
Desiree’ Terrance’

His reply had been included along with my letter to him and was dated Saturday, September 29, 1875.

‘Dearest Desiree’,

I was more than surprised when your Uncle Joshua came to see me and hand delivered your letter. The date on it made me realize that it’s been over a year since I saw your lovely face or heard your laughing voice.

I had no idea you were living with Count Marcus and his family, but was glad that your Uncle Joshua told me that I would possibly find you and your tutor at the Turlough Horse Fair yesterday, Friday the 28th of September. Our visit brought back many memories of the time we spent together onboard Goddess of the Sea.

If I’m able to make it to the October 5th Ball, I’ll be dressed as a Navy Admiral and then you’ll see how well we dance together.

Love always,
Phillipe’

My next letter was dated October 6th, 1875.

‘Dearest Phillipe,

When I saw your smiling face across the ballroom, I felt as if we’d never been apart. I can only hope that the Count’s rudeness won’t prevent you from attending any of the other balls, if time permits.

P.S. You do waltz as well as you row a canoe or walk the decks of my father’s clipper ship.

Your Little Mermaid,
Desiree’ Terrance’

His reply was dated October 11th.

‘Dearest Desiree’, My Little Mermaid,

I can well understand how protective the Count is towards you and like him I'd move heaven or hell to assure your safety.

I'm truly sorry, but in order to continue my studies at the university, I have to take numerous exams at this time. I won't even have the honor of attending your birthday social.

May the god of good fortune bring you abundant sunshine on the gloomiest of days. My thoughts and love will be with you on your 18th birthday, Desiree'.

Yours always,
Phillipe'

The letters came and were replied to, almost as if I weren't a married woman. After reading more of them, I discovered the element which was missing from my marriage to Marcus; it all boiled down to the fact that I loved Phillipe and he loved me. If that was true, then why did I consent to marry Marcus? Only Dr. Franco could help me answer that question.

At my next session with Dr. Franco, I gave him all the letters that Phillipe and I had written to each other and after he finished reading them, he took out his medallion and put me under hypnosis. He snapped his fingers, then asked, "What do you see?"

"My husband Marcus, dancing with me...no, he's waltzing with my twin sister, Bethanie."

"That's right, Desiree'. Marcus loved Bethanie with all his heart and soul, but she spurned his advances and ran off. Your father offered him a tremendous bribe to marry you in place of Bethanie so the family name would remain unbesmirched."

"You mean my own father forced me into a loveless marriage?"

"Yes, even though Marcus was in love with Bethanie and you were in love with Phillipe."

I didn't know what to think of this bizarre situation, but felt as if the weight

of the world had been lifted from my shoulders. I wasn't wrong in hating my husband, but I'd let things settle down in my heart and soul before taking any action. The morning after Marcus's birthday festivities, I'd begin a discreet search for Phillippe and see if he still loved me the least little bit.

My daily sessions continued with Dr. Franco, and I was spiritually guided by Father Quimper. Sheridan and Rochelle kept me updated about the upcoming birthday celebration for Marcus and although I hadn't seen him in recent days, that suited me just fine.

On the day of his party I woke up out of a sound sleep, thinking that by tomorrow I'd be working on my new life. The bedroom door opened and Sheridan marched in, closely followed by a serving girl carrying a tray heaped with breakfast fare. My stomach rumbled at the smell of fresh apricots, apples, and cherries wafting to my nostrils. Sharp cheeses accompanied the fruit tarts and as usual there was a glass of nourishing red liquid for me to drink. "The time has come to rise and shine Desiree'." Servants arrived bearing assorted bowls filled with ointments and cosmetics to prepare me for the evening ahead. On their heels came Rochelle's personal hairdresser and her entourage with the clothing I was to wear. They attended to their specific tasks and Sheridan asked me to disrobe.

Hands wielding soft cloths rubbed and massaged almond oil into every inch of my body, again and again, until my skin was soft and supple and the tenseness in my muscles relaxed. Sheridan patted the settee and I sat in front of the gilt-framed mirror, staring at a different version of myself as my image kept changing. Rochelle's personal make-up artist applied exotic cosmetics to my face and offered explanations of their supposed magical attributes as she worked. "Everything you see is authentic and when I'm finished, you'll look like Hella Dracon, the infamous Egyptian Goddess." She dipped her fingertips into a clay pot, then dabbed and blended the silkened creme on my cheeks in circular motions until they turned blood red. "This rouge is ochre, made of iron oxide." She wiped the ochre off her fingertips, then chose two lead crystal dishes, one filled to the brim with blue powder and one small bowl of golden scented oil. A heavy silver spoon was used to scoop the powder into the oil, creating a thick paste that she smoothed on my lips. "This mixture is made from crushed dried grapes and added to a secret recipe that very few people know of." My lips burned like hot incense, then froze into a solid smile. Horrific anticipation circulated

blood ever faster to my veins and my nerve endings tingled when a small horsehair brush colored the outline of my eyes in dark grey. “ This is a derivative of a lead ore called Galena and is supposed to protect the wearer from the ‘Evil Eye.’ ” She applied a dark green ointment to my eyelids. “ This copper ore is malachite and symbolizes fertility. ”

Someone behind me boldly stated, “ But not in her particular case. ” Voices tittered amidst gales of outright laughter and vicious whispers.

I desperately wanted to scream, but the muscles in my throat were constricted. I sighed deeply, agitated about my current state of affairs, knowing what was left of my life would shortly be changing for the worse. A soothing feminine voice inside my head spoke calmly. “ Desiree’, don’t worry; your life will be what it’s meant to be, all in good time. ”

I felt like a statue as my hair was woven into intricate patterns resembling writhing snakes on my head. Two servant girls helped me rise and Rochelle dressed me. She said, “ This is a kalasari. ” It was close fitted white linen which flowed from my breasts to my feet. On top of this she placed a fringed and pleated crimson robe that was wrapped tightly around my waist. Sheridan pulled it over my shoulders and Rochelle secured it underneath my bosom with Dr. Franco’s hypnotic medallion, its golden star beaming brightly.

A signal was given. “ Now you’ll be presented to Blaec Toth Snaca. ” With great ceremony I was carried to the cavernous basement that had been made to resemble the sacristy. My back was pressed tightly against a black cross on a raised dais. Sheridan lifted my arms and servants stretched them out horizontally. They were held in place by Rochelle as Father Quimper intertwined two pure gold snake charms on my upper arms. My wrists and ankles were tied with strong golden cords by Dr. Franco so I had no means of escape.

The lighting from the rose-window dimmed as thirteen girls proceeded down the center aisle from the back of the room. They were dressed as vestal virgins and carried small oil lamps which they placed in front of me. Off to the side were sounds of lutes, flutes and harps, playing a strange haunting melody. I shivered inside my soul as these girls danced, taking off layer after layer of thin translucent veils. Each of them was tattooed on their arms, legs, shoulders, backs, breasts and bellies with snakes of gold, blue, red, orange,

and yellow. Their slow sensuous motions turned into a frenzied dance of evil proportions, ending abruptly as one by one they came and bowed low before me, then kissed my right cheek.

They removed themselves from my presence and were replaced by Dr. Franco and Father Quimper, who prostrated their bodies at my feet, speaking in tones of reverence and awe. “ Hella Dracon, Theophanic Goddess of Blood, we can see how pleased you are at this feast presented in your honor. ” They crawled away as my nightmare began.

Monks carrying ebony staffs of intertwined snakes stopped underneath the strange wreathed gargoyles on the cloistered walls to drink their fill of red liquid from the overflowing portals, then they paraded to the center of the room. Their blood-stained robes of white obscured most of their facial features as they surrounded the podium where I stood. My fate was signed, sealed, and about to be delivered and I said a quick prayer asking to be forgiven for my numerous sins before meeting my Maker. The same soothing voice spoke to me again.

“ Have no fear, for I’ll always be with you, Desiree’ . ”

One last monk entered the room. He was dressed in crimson robes, but threw back his cowl to reveal the mask of a hideous black snake with blood-encrusted fangs and piercing red eyes. He faced the crowd and they fell to their knees chanting,

“ Blessed be the holy name of Blaec Toth Snaca
Personifying the wicked darkness that we worship
Cruel and relentless in his bleeding ritual
He rules the forces of chaos and confusion. ”

He brought his palm to rest on the medallion which clasped my robe together. He removed it, then pressed it to my lips as the robe billowed around my feet. His sleeve slid to his elbow, revealing a hand that was long and slender; on his third finger was the unmistakable black onyx ring that belonged to my husband, Marcus, and I wondered how this being had come into possession of it. I didn’t have time to think as he pushed the kalisari to my waist, freeing my breasts for everyone to see. “ Imprint your souls with the beauty of her skin and inhale the blessed scent of precious almond offerings. Know that she truly is the sacred vessel. ”

I wanted to faint dead away, blot out what was to occur from my mind, but fate didn't give me a choice in the events which shaped my final destiny. A doomsday vision of being ravaged enveloped me, but it wasn't a rape in any sense of the word that I understood. "This visage of Hella Dracon will soon flow with fresh sweet blood, the life force which nourishes and sustains us. Our benefactress will be honored with life everlasting for the gift she's provided."

I silently cursed everyone that lived in Castle Desiree' and hoped they'd spend their lives rotting away in Hell, but figured that Dame Fortune would make sure I arrived there first. Blaec Toth Snaca removed his mask and I saw the face of my husband damning me. Marcus placed his unholy hands on my breasts and his evil mouth sought my nipples. He bit down with a force so hard my blood flowed in excruciating torrents of pain and I screamed in terror as tears hotly streamed down my cheeks! "Tears and blood; the wisdom of the Goddess herself."

Sheridan took her place by Marcus's side, her hatred of me clear as day. She spat out her words. "I knew from the beginning that you weren't any good for Marcus. He's told me over and over again how much he hates you for destroying his life and happiness, but most of all the love he had with Bethanie." She brought her face close to mine. "Marcus knows you've been impersonating her for quite some time and he gave you just enough rope to hang yourself." She smirked. "Good grief, Desiree'! You don't have an inkling as to what you really are, so let me fill you in." She laughed hysterically. "You're an addict to life and living, a needy vampire who consumes the blood of innocent beings." I couldn't comprehend her meanings. "The drink that Dr. Franco provided for you was pure blood, guaranteed to keep you healthy; fattening of the sacrificial lamb for a special birthday gift, so to speak." Sheridan pointed to my husband. "Marcus has repaid you in spades. Every time you consented to come here and speak with your God, Marcus has preyed on you and now he'll drain you dry, taking back the life force you stole without his permission."

Marcus stared blankly in my direction, then the black rage of death emanated from his pores. I writhed in agony as he sank his fangs into the tender flesh of my neck. "Desiree', my one desire has been granted. God will be the only witness to your final destruction."

Memories raced through my mind, replaying the awful events that led to my

demise. The first seven and a half weeks after Marcus and I married were the happiest times in my life and we were never far apart from each other's sides. He commissioned an artist to paint my portrait and hung it next to his mother's above the mantelpiece in the sitting room, so all incoming visitors could comment about the beauty of the two women he loved most in the world.

Marcus had promised me a honeymoon in Paris two weeks prior to Christmas Day, with parties, shopping, and plays to attend, but he had business problems to deal with and suggested that Sheridan accompany me instead, and he'd arrive as soon as he possibly could.

Sheridan and I left Castle Desiree' on December 9th and spent a quiet evening reading the Paris newspapers in our hotel room. On Tuesday we shopped at many splendid stores for Christmas gifts and presents and Wednesday and Thursday we fulfilled our obligations to afternoon social teas and fancy evening parties. Friday evening Sheridan arranged for us to attend a play at the university and when it was over we went to the lobby and she said, "Close your eyes for a minute, Desiree'. I have a special friend I want you to meet. "

I turned around and Phillippe stood in front of me. He was all smiles. "Desiree', I have the most wonderful news. You've been living with my long lost sister, Sheridan. " He hugged her tightly to him and I saw the family resemblance. Before I had a chance to say anything, she took him aside and his countenance changed from contented happiness to scowls and frowns. "How could you be so cruel and heartless? Have you no shame or remorse for your actions?" He strode away into the crowds and I never understood why he wouldn't stay and let me answer his questions.

Sheridan had a strange smile of triumph on her ruby-red lips. No sooner had Phillippe left than he was replaced by two policemen. One asked, "Are you Mistress Desiree' Canossa?"

"Yes, I am. " He shackled my wrists and led me away to the bitter cold perdition of a dank Parisian jail cell without an explanation.

On Saturday morning I was given a note. 'Desiree', my brother has seen fit to let you cover his debts to society; it's the least you can do for leading him on and then breaking his heart as you did. It wasn't signed, but the moment I

finished reading it, the jailer snatched the paper from my hands and tore it up.

All the pieces began to fit into the puzzle of my life and I had the first of many out of body experiences. I watched from a short distance as Marcus held my limp and bloodless form in his arms. Tears fell fast and furious when he realized the finality of his actions. My soul slipped into the amulet around my wrist and his eyes were drawn to it. He drew in a great gasp of air when he didn't see his own countenance, but mine staring back at him as his fangs dripped with my death's blood. He carried my lifeless body upstairs and laid it on the couch in front of my portrait. The people I hated most gathered to look at my husband's handiwork and were startled by a booming voice from above. "Yes, Desiree' is dead, but as I live and breathe, so shall her spirit remain alive inside her painting." I recognized her voice as the one who had been calming my fears.

I looked down on them through my portrait's eyes and Sheridan spoke. "The Great Goddess Hella Dracon has made her ruling and we cannot argue with her wishes." The sitting room emptied and Marcus locked the door to one and all. I closed my eyes and my spirit slept as one of the dead.

Chapter 24

One fine day my spirit was roused from the deepest slumber; strangers were taking my portrait down from its preferred place above the mantle and placing it within a wooden packing crate. It was dark as death's abode and I was frightened of what the future held in store for me. "Don't be alarmed, Desiree'. You're sailing to your new home in America and when the timing is right, your body will be nourished by evil-blooded men." The Great Goddess calmed and soothed my anguished spirit and I slept again, but woke to confusion as hands bumped and jostled my painting into the same mantelpiece position it had held in Castle Desiree's sitting room. Kermes Twa reminded me of the Mount Salem house that Marcus was going to build as a wedding present for Bethanie. "He changed his mind, Desiree'. Casa Sheridan is an exact replica of Castle Desiree'." I shuddered at that thought.

The Great Goddess told me I'd only be allowed out of my portrait at the beginning of October when the grape harvest commenced and at the end of

March when the new grape vines were planted. Physical contact with Marcus or Sheridan was forbidden, but my anger festered whenever I saw her smirking face laughing at my circumstances.

My first feeding was a 20th birthday meal on Saturday, October 17th, 1877. Kermes Twa led me to a young woman who'd been dead less than 24 hours. She had spurned the advances of a very wealthy gentleman, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. He used his fists to beat her senseless, then he raped her while she was unconscious, and threw her lifeless body into a deep ravine in Coltsfoot Canyon. When I entered her soul, she seemed scared to be among the living, but brightened considerably when I told her what was in store for her killer; retribution's revenge would be more than sweet.

The Great Goddess sped up the deterioration of her rotting flesh and we met the wealthy gentleman on his way home from a night of drunken revelry. He was all alone in his carriage when we materialized next to him. He began to say 'Hail Mary's' and begged to be pardoned from his many sins. Kermes Twa spoke from above. "Your heinous acts have marked you as an unbeliever. Prepare to die!"

We fed on his warm salty blood until he was too weak to move. "You're damned to perdition and will suffer the eternal torments of Hell, while I've been guaranteed a place in Heaven." Our fangs were justified brass knuckles on his jugular vein; we drained him completely dry and left his body to the Hounds of Hell. Her soul made its way to heavenly shores and I returned to my portrait and slept.

Years came and went in much the same way until October of 1997. The Great Goddess was extremely pleased with how well I'd done her bidding and gave me extra time out for good behavior.

On Monday, January 31st, 1999, Kermes Twa allowed me to have physical contact with Marcus, Sher, Valera and Gustav. I was shocked beyond reason when I entered a decidedly different body whose pores were revoltingly permeated with wide-eyed innocence and I realized she wasn't dead, but alive! She was so much like I used to be that Marcus had fallen head-over-heels in love with her. Bitter hatred flowed through my soul and my thoughts centered on ridding myself of her body and spirit before he married her in place of me, consequences be damned!

Gradually the Great Goddess blended Nancy's spirit with mine, until I didn't know where she started and I ended. Even the overwhelming love we had for Marcus couldn't quash his plans to bring back his beloved Bethanie.

Past memories sparkled in the back of my mind, exploding into the night I became engaged to Marcus, the very night my twin sister met her demise for the second time.

I'd pretended to be ill and left my engagement party to Marcus Canossa in order to be with the love of my life, Phillipe Grenoble. I made my way to Coltsfoot Canyon as lightning flashed and thunder rumbled and grumbled from black and grey storm clouds. Huge droplets of cold biting rain pelted my skin when I recognized Desiree's familiar face come back to haunt me from the grave. "Bethanie, there's no way in heaven or hell I'll see you married to my husband, Marcus!"

Her spectre twisted my arm and I clawed and scratched with all the fury of a hellcat, then pierced the night with a bloodcurdling scream. Sheridan tackled Desiree's ghost and sent it sailing over the canyon's edge into the black ravine; in a few short seconds she hit the jagged rocks below. "You only got what you so righteously deserved!" Sheridan shrieked as if she thought Desiree was still alive.

I never thought to question the hows and whys of Desiree's return from the afterlife, but Sheridan said this event would solve my problems because everyone would think it was my lifeless form on the canyon floor. "Run to your future, Bethanie!"

Phillipe waited in the orchard shadows and we rode his saddled horse into Springfield. The porter helped us board the midnight train heading west to San Francisco, then showed us to our private sleeping quarters. Sheridan had packed my bags and I was finally able to shed my black shirt and pants. "You're more beautiful than the last time I saw you Bethanie." Phillipe placed his hands on my slightly rounded belly as truth dawned in his eyes. "Are you going to have a baby?"

"Although I haven't confirmed it with a doctor, I'm almost

sure, Phillipe. ” I smiled as I thought of the first and only time we’d made love.

Phillipe hugged me tight and I felt at home in his arms. He laughed, then captured my lips to kiss, making my heart burst with love and contentment. “ We’ll get married as soon as possible. ” The steel wheels clicked and clacked as we made sweet passionate love over and over again.

We exchanged wedding vows and gold wedding bands at a small chapel outside Columbus, Ohio, and I officially became Mrs. Phillip Connor. Phillipe had legally changed his name after he graduated from Paris University so he could start the rest of his life on a fresh note.

Life was pleasant and joyful in San Francisco and I forged friendships with local stage actors and actresses while Phillip was away on business trips. I helped with costumes and make-up and eventually got a lead-actress role until my pregnancy became conspicuous. The director said I could reprise my role after the baby was born.

Phillip took time off for our baby’s birth and surprised me as Little Phillip suckled at my breast. Nestled inside a black jewelry box on a cloud of gold tissue lay a thirty inch necklace of equal, alternating Lapis Lazuli and Carnelian stones, interspersed with four Moss Agates, two on either side. Hanging on a gold clasp from the very middle of the strand was a highly polished star-shaped stone in contrasting wave bands of light yellow, tan, brown, red, grey and black. “ This is Petrified Sequoia, and the man I bought it from said it brings serenity to the wearer. ” Phillip placed it around my neck; the matching earrings were made of the same stone and shaped into crescent moons. “ Your love has given my heart wings to fly and I’ve brought you back a bit of the moon and stars, Bethanie. ”

“ You and Baby Phillip mean more to me than anything or anyone else in this world, and I’ll treasure your gifts until the day I die. ” I kissed him as the baby snuggled against my heart.

Life was never dull with my husband and baby, and the days flew by. The last thing I remember clearly was our third wedding anniversary; we left Baby Phillip with his nanny and went on a picnic excursion across San Francisco Bay. The fog lifted early and the sun sparkled on the blue-green water as we watched the mainland shoreline recede. The boat anchored on

the white sands of Sugar Island and hand-in-hand we strolled along the salty beach in our bare feet, picking up seashells to take home with us. Plates of cold chicken, hard cheese, and sourdough bread were spread out on a red and white checked blanket and we sipped on sweet strawberry wine. The magic of the afternoon lingered in our hearts until we were halfway home. A hard driving rainstorm came out of the west and crashing waves pounded the boat. Phillip held me tight within his loving arms and soon we slept in Davy Jones' locker.

When my spirit was first roused from its watery grave I only caught faint glimmers of light and sound, but voices and realities came into crystal-clear view on a chilly Tuesday morning. The awe-struck eyes of Marcus Canossa stared straight into my soul. "My Precious, I see your spirit residing within the windows of Nancy's soul. Return and give me what's rightfully mine."

I didn't know the stranger he called Nancy, but I was housed in her body and rendered speechless when my sister's spirit pirouetted across the stage of Nancy's mind. She and Desiree' were closer than two peas in a pod and I listened to their private conversation.

"Desiree', didn't I give Marcus everything that was mine to give? And who is Bethanie?" I was surprised when I felt the wetness of tears roll down her cheeks. "Doesn't he love me the least little bit?"

Desiree' sighed. "Bethanie is my twin sister. Marcus seems to think her spirit has been reincarnated in you. He always thought the sun rose and set with my sister; in fact he still does." She yawned in boredom. "Those who say they love you most are the first to betray your heart, soul, and body."

"Marcus, what does this Bethanie person mean to you and why do you want her to return? I thought you only had feelings for me!" Nancy had every right to feel violated; here he was playing mind games again. Marcus wanted me because he couldn't have Desiree' and the only reason he wanted Nancy was in order to get to me.

"Nancy, you must remember something if you're asking me about Bethanie. Not once did I mention her name." Marcus certainly knew how to bring jealousy to the forefront of a relationship.

She became distraught as a small speck of gold-silk light swished in front of her eyes and my preferred scent of Night Blooming Jasmine invaded her senses. “ Marcus, there’s no way on God’s green earth that I’ll pretend to be this woman for you! If you can’t love me for who I am, then I won’t consider being your wife. ” She knew I was in the audience as she protested with uncontrollable rage. “ I want Valera to help me dress and then Gustav can drive me home. ”

The act ended for me and I exited into the wings until I could play my part again.

“ Bethanie! ” My name was called to come on stage. At first the scenery was unfamiliar, but then I recognized the American gothic with the wrap around porch and extensive latticework carvings. Its roof was steeply peaked with two angled bay windows under the gable and the shingled walls were the light lavender shade of blooming Italian asters. The two matching towers on each end of the structure were painted golden ivory.

The front door was set in an alcove of pearlized garnet and behind me a male voice said, “ We’ve arrived, Countess Nancy. That’s Angelo’s trademark, his exclusive color. ”

We waited a few minutes for someone to acknowledge our presence. The person who opened the door had salt and pepper hair, a warm smile, and a charming personality. I paid no attention as he briefly spoke to the man and woman who accompanied Nancy. He swept his arm in front of us and her eyes slowly adjusted to the dark interior. My heart jumped to my throat in alarm because I’d expected to see the home I grew up in, but it was a woman’s clothing store! Angelo said, “ I’ve saved the best for last. ” His mouth barely touched the back of her hand and my tears of disgust mingled with her emotional memories of Marcus, then silently rolled down her face. “ I see that I’ve upset you, and that’s the last thing I intended to do to such a Lovely Lady. ”

It was Nancy’s cue to speak. “ Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Countess Nancy and we have a mutual acquaintance named Desiree’; she’s spoken

very highly of you. ”

“ Countess Nancy. ” He paused for a minute. “ How is it you know Desiree’? ”

“ We’re two halves of a whole spirit, blended into the soul of one person. ” Nancy didn’t have a clue.

I decided to put my acting skills to the test. “ Angelo, I never would’ve guessed that your home was a lingerie shop. ” I frightened Nancy and she called for Desiree’, while I waited and watched in wry amusement.

“ Your taste is impeccable, Angelo. ” Desiree’s eyes clouded my vision. “ I want to see your newest collection of pajamas and nightgowns in the style I’m accustomed to. ”

“ It’s true that style and taste is in the eye of the beholder, but your lack of imagination is appalling, Ducky! ” I received no answer from Desiree’ and realized she knew nothing about my grand entrance into Nancy’s mind. How deliciously exciting.

Nancy’s body suddenly felt faint and nauseous. “ Desiree’, what’s wrong with me? I’ve never felt this ill before in my life. ” Angelo helped her over to a strange looking chair and handed her a glass of water.

I gave her a bit of much needed advice. “ You should do as Angelo suggests, but I don’t think you need a doctor. ” In a stage whisper I added, “ Just yet. ”

Nancy wanted to rest and Angelo led her across the hall. Elation surrounded my heart as we entered the drawing room. The elaborate wallpaper was scrolled in small scale floral patterns with finely detailed vines and birds set against a background of red, blue, and green, overprinted with shades of cream and tan. The ceiling moldings were intricately carved and painted a lighter shade of cream, while the ceiling itself had added scrollwork decorations. The window drapes were made of brocade and matched the wallpaper perfectly. They were folded and held back with scroll shaped fitments, embellished with red tassels, blue-ribbons and green festoons. The gold-gilded valances adorned the tops and were made of velvet and lace. Angelo helped her sit down on a deep goldenrod and emerald green brocade settee in the back corner of the room, then lifted her feet as she leaned her

back and head against the overstuffed arm. She closed her eyes to the cool dimness and was out like a lady with the vapors.

I wasn't privy to Nancy's dreams, but bided my time. She woke shortly and Angelo suggested she stay the evening in one of his guestrooms. She plodded upstairs in a sluggish mode and I remembered the way I'd felt in the early stages of pregnancy. She took a seat midway up the steps and Angelo rushed to her side; he cupped her elbow and they trudged to the top, turned left, then stopped at the first door on the right.

Angelo twisted the doorknob and it opened on oiled hinges, revealing my own exquisitely feminine bedroom. The magnificent black wrought-iron bed was lavishly decorated with three floral medallions; a large one in the middle, and a smaller one to each side. The medallions were black with flowers of blue, red, white, yellow, and pink, intertwined with tiny green leaves. Black throw pillows were delicately embroidered with Red Indian elephants and complimented the crimson bedspread of finest Egyptian cotton. Framed emphera hung on the ivory-colored walls and served as artwork. The window treatments were of ivory lace, trimmed with gold-braid across the bottom. A flowered needlepoint rug matched the framed emphera. Over in the corner by the nickel-plated parlor stove was a glorious old claw foot tub, equipped with a shower. A handsome full-length mirror was attached to the wall on the far side of the room next to the cherry wood chest of drawers. A lace doily lay across the top of the dresser and on each end was a carved ivory elephant, its trunk in the air, holding an aqua colored glass scone.

Nancy spoke the truth as she lay down on the goosedown mattress. " Angelo, this room befits a Queen. " He left the room and softly closed the door behind him.

She called out to Desiree' again, but I was the one who answered. " This is nothing short of a miracle, Ducky. Consider this house as my home! " I squiggled closer as she drifted off to the far reaches of sleep.

Someone placed a cold compress on Nancy's forehead. " Desiree', what made me faint? "

" Time will tell! " I closed the distance between us, but grew bored with her activities until I saw the reflection of her dark red skimpy outfit in the

mirror.

Valera walked over to the dresser and handed a small white box to Nancy. She lifted the lid and love hit strong and pure. Nestled inside were the very same presents that Phillip had graced me with on the day of Baby Phillip's birth. I wondered who the giver of these particular gifts might be. " Adrian would be honored if you'd wear this present from him this evening. " She applied Nancy's make-up, then brushed the hair back from her face, letting it fall naturally in curling waves. Valera kissed the top of her head and smiled. " You remind me of Desiree' in so many ways. " Nancy put the jewelry on. " Once Adrian lays eyes on you, he'll be yours to do with as you please. "

We walked through the door to the head of the stairs. Did my eyes deceive me or was that an incarnation of my beloved Phillipe waiting on the bottom step? His piercing blue eyes gazed straight into my soul and I remembered our first meeting at Desiree's gravesite.

I was carelessly tearing rose petals from the funeral wreaths that Papa and Marcus had left, telling her in my own sisterly way good-bye and good riddance, when a stranger's voice called out from a short distance behind me. " Your Uncle Joshua told me your sister had passed away, and I came to offer my condolences. " I turned around and Phillipe gasped in shock, then made the sign of the cross as if he thought I might be Desiree' come back to haunt him.

" I'm Desiree's twin sister, Bethanie. " I touched his arm and instantly knew he was the man I wanted to marry.

He smiled and breathed a huge sigh relief. " Allow me to properly introduce myself; my name is Phillipe Grenoble and I met Desiree' aboard Goddess of the Sea when she sailed to France. " I felt very at ease in his presence and told him all about my life and my unwanted engagement to Marcus; that's when he said he wanted to see me again.

My train of thought was interrupted by a giant bear hug. " Nancy, you're as graceful as your name implies, and a ravishing beauty as well. " He kissed her cheek and I got the distinct impression she wanted him to do more. Electricity danced in her veins as they chatted and I caught his words in mid-air. " Was it co-incidence or fate? My Uncle only advertises his business by word of mouth. " His lips barely brushed the corner of her mouth and I told

her body it needed to receive more than what Adrian was giving.

Like a busy bee, I buzzed inside her head, gaining the upper hand. “ You’re too slow to even be my understudy! ”

“ Angelo wrangled your name out of me, then foretold me about our evening date. ” Delicious sensations tingled in her heart as my happy soul ate away at the outer edges of her mind.

“ Nancy, it just goes to show that you and I are on intersecting paths; we can travel the road together and see where it leads. ” He pointed his finger in the air, as if testing wind direction. “ Right now, the scintillating scent of fine food is calling my taste buds and stomach to dinner. I hope you’re as famished as I am. ” Adrian locked his arm through hers and opened the door to the left of the staircase. I drew in a deep breath as the Victorian scene unfolded in front of my eyes. The deep blue walls had faded into light blue panels and the ornate crystal chandelier still resided proudly over the casually arranged centerpiece of green ivy and baby’s breath. Laid on the rectangular rosewood table were the blue oyster dishes and heavy gold-gilded silverware that I remembered from childhood days.

Unadorned wall sconces flanked the mirror over the mantelpiece and the potted marigolds, bluebells, and red carnations on the marble fireplace mantel matched the elaborate cornices. The glass-paned doors in the cornflower blue hutch revealed Mama’s many fine collectables; gold-rimmed dishware, pitchers with red hearts, whimsical figurines (graceful ballerinas, magical magicians, and white as snow swans), and ceramic roses in various shades of red.

Angelo entered the dining room from the opposite direction and Nancy put into action what I wanted to do; she hugged him, then gave him a decent peck on the cheek. “ Angelo, this is magnificent! ”

Adrian’s aura drew Nancy back to him. “ You’re a mind-reader extraordinaire, Adrian. I feel extremely blessed in having met both you and Angelo. ”

She threw her arms around him. “ And they say you can never come home again. Well, I just proved them wrong. ” I wanted to come out in full force.

“ Desiree’, what did you say? ”

I wiggled myself a little further into Nancy’s soul. “ Why nothing at all, Ducky. Are you hearing things? ” My laugh sent a chill down her spine.

Adrian asked Nancy to sit beside him on one of the blue and white cushioned benches and fingered the necklace stones. “ The Petrified Sequoia gives the wearer the ability to accept whatever life throws her way, without acting like a drama queen. The Lapis Lazuli encourages integrity in relationships and is a powerful fidelity charm. The Carnelian reminds one to be ‘in the moment.’ ” He gently touched the Moss Agates. “ These jewels suit you to perfection, bringing abundance, balance, and self-confidence. ”

The first sip of Angelo’s iced tea hinted of peaches and apricots, then I heard soothing sounds of nature merging with piano and strings. Ocean waves lapped the beach and gentle raindrops fell, transporting me back to the days when Phillipe and I walked hand in hand along the deserted stretch of rocky beach, twenty miles northeast of my father’s apple orchard. While Papa and Marcus always had business matters to attend to, Phillipe and I shared stolen moments of love and laughter in the warm summer sun.

Hunger pangs invaded my reverie as Adrian spoke. “ I hope you enjoy what Angelo’s chef has prepared tonight. Tossed salad with his own blended vinaigrette dressing, boiled Maine shrimp and lobster tails with browned garlic butter for dipping, and fresh creamed corn and French bread. ”

Nancy’s mouth watered in anticipation for the sustenance of food, but her next thought confused me. “ Adrian’s life force to complete the evening. ” I’d have to go with her flow to find out what she meant.

Throughout the meal, Adrian spoke about the Natural History of the Wolf. Nancy and I were both fascinated by his words, but I had to stand in the shadows when he kissed the back of Nancy’s hand and Desiree’ quickly rose to the surface.

“ Now is the time to tell you about Desiree’s name. ” Adrian’s mood was jovial. “ She can be unashamedly vain, parading in front of a full-length mirror, then deciding which drop-dead dress will stop people in their tracks. Desiree’ is very popular, thanks to the sheer flamboyance of her behavior. Her enormous charisma assures an invitation to every party, and she’s well

worth the attention she demands. ” He closed his eyes for a minute.

“ Desiree’s presence surrounds and infuses you now, Nancy. Apart, you’re separate entities in this world, two incomplete halves of a whole in need of blending to achieve balance. ”

“ More like mixing oil and water together. ” I was the unknown philosopher, finagling my way to top billing.

Desiree’ was very pleased with what Adrian said and shoved me aside. “ It took me some time, but I finally came into my own and don’t intend to lose what I’ve contributed to your life, Nancy. ”

After Desiree’s interruption, Adrian continued. “ She has many special qualities. Her perception simultaneously allows her to see the beginning and ending of any given situation. She’s compassionate and intuitive, but doesn’t conform to ordinary patterns. Spontaneity is Desiree’s keyword and she changes direction at the drop of a hat. Personal freedom tops her list and her friendships tend to gravitate towards those with artistic and bohemian persuasions. ”

“ Most of what Adrian said is true, except for the ultimate gift of compassion I received when Kermes Twa combined our beings, Nancy. The Great Goddess is sculpting us into her newest form of art. ”

“ Nancy...Desiree’ . ” Adrian breathed their names. “ You’re framed in exquisite harmony, the give and take of evil darkness and innocent light. ” I didn’t know the Great Goddess or her art forms, but knew how to get Adrian’s attention back to me.

“ I want to have the same effect on you that you have on me. ” He leaned over and crushed his lips to Nancy’s and I infused her brain with my thoughts. She opened her mouth to him, letting him taste and explore, while intense sensations and electric emotions coursed throughout her body.

She broke free, but not before I shouted, “ Phillipe! ”

“ You can’t tell me that kiss meant nothing, ” Adrian boldly stated. “ I felt your whole body respond to me, as if we’d been lovers in another life. ”

“ Nancy, enough of this foolishness with Adrian. You’re not allowed to have

wants and needs of a physical nature with anyone but Marcus! ” Desiree’ spouted pure nonsense.

“ Adrian, I’m sorry. ” Nancy wanted to cry, but I grinned from ear to ear.

I was stronger than Desiree’ and she fled the scene when Adrian kissed my soul. “ Phillipe, my one and only love! ” I gloated in triumph.

He pulled me up with him and pressed his body close to mine. “ Give yourself to me. ” His kisses burned like wildfire on my neck.

Seconds before he bit down on my pulse point, Desiree’ screamed, “ Once you give your blood to him, all is lost! ”

Desiree’ pushed him away and Phillipe faded from view as Adrian’s glazed eyes slowly cleared. “ Good God, this isn’t like any love I’ve ever experienced before. ” Adrian was very upset with himself and so was I when he said, “ Please forgive me, Nancy? ”

She backed away from him and I eavesdropped on their enlightening conversation. “ Adrian, you’re moving way too fast for me. ” Nancy folded her arms across her chest for protection. “ I haven’t had much experience in being a Vampire; even the mere taste of my blood could result in serious complications and repercussions for both of us. ” I knew what had to be done in order for Phillipe’s soul to permanently return to me, but would wait until the timing was right. After dinner, they descended into the nether world of Angelo’s dungeon, while I took a seat in the balcony.

“ Adrian’s overflow of fresh blood can hear your body staking out its claim on his life force. ” I felt Desiree’s words were meant exclusively for me. “ Angelo knows what steps to take. ”

A well-concealed door was hidden in the back corner of the cellar. Angelo opened it to reveal a brightly lit parlor area. A tray holding a pitcher of lemonade, glasses, and a plate of oatmeal cookies was on top of a rosewood table, positioned in front of an overstuffed floral couch. “ I think Adrian needs a time out. ” Angelo smiled and handed Adrian a tumbler filled with the yellow liquid.

Angelo took the drained glass away, just before Adrian plopped down and

started to yawn. With his head on one arm of the couch and his feet at the other end, Adrian snored gently into the back cushions. Nancy and Desiree' drew his engorged jugular vein into their waiting mouth and clamped down hard. At first I was repulsed by his gushing fountain of blood, but soon warmed to his taste and essence. Soothing sensations circulated within our blood stream, and I closed my eyes for a moment. Nancy startled me. " Does Adrian have a connection to your past, Desiree'? "

" Why are you boring me with silly details that serve no purpose? What's in the past should stay dead and buried as it has no bearing on me, you, or our life now. "

I whispered, " She's right, Ducky. Desiree's past is long gone, but my future is right around the corner! " Angelo took Nancy and Desiree' on a father tour of his dungeon and I exited stage right to gather strength and resolve from Nancy's miseries.

I was called back to center stage with the understanding that the blood high effects of Adrian's life force had worn off, leaving Nancy weak and on edge. Valera wrapped Nancy's fingers around a goblet that was filled to the brim with red liquid and she drank it all, then closed her eyes and slept fitfully.

Nancy's eyes opened to a vision of Adrian bathed in pale moonlight, but I saw the face of my beloved Phillipe. His kiss left her breathless with passionate desire, but Desiree's mind clashed against the will of her body. " Stop your foolishness, this instant! " She ranted and raved. " You're going to ruin all the best laid plans of Kermes Twa to keep..."

Silence reigned supreme and I stated in triumphant merriment, " Desiree's not here with you, but I am! " Phillipe's kiss was charged with electricity, a current of sensational pinpricks pouring through my veins. I felt his hands on my face, touching and caressing as if he couldn't believe I was real.

I threw my arms around his neck and a fevered longing took control. His hands traveled all over my body, as intense emotions raged. " Bethanie, my Darling. " There were tears in his eyes.

Nancy surrendered her soul to me as Phillipe and I renewed the intimacy of our wedding vows again and again.

Chapter 25

When Nancy woke, confusion reigned in her mind, while I savored thoughts of being with Phillippe. “ Valera, what’s happening to me? I don't feel at all like myself. Do you have any idea if Adrian’s been present in my room? ”

“ I checked on him a few minutes ago, and he’s sleeping peacefully in his own quarters. ” She sighed. “ The Great Goddess has imparted her sentiments to me; with Adrian’s blood flowing in your veins, your understanding of Bethanie and Desiree’ will be revealed entirely as she deems fit. ” She tenderly held Nancy’s hand. “ Your realistic dreams of Adrian are puzzle pieces that must be solved. ”

I paid scant attention to the rest of their boring conversation. Valera handed her a cup of lime blossom tea that Nancy drank and we both drifted off to sleep.

In the morning Angelo swung the bedroom door open wide for Valera to bring in a breakfast of apples, apricots, blackberries, oranges, pears, raspberries, and strawberries. Nancy ate until she was content. “ Valera, I haven’t felt this good since...”

I almost screamed, “ Since last night when I made love to my husband, ” but managed to keep quiet.

“ Since the last time you were with Marcus? ” Valera questioned her.

“ Valera, that’s doubtful. I was mixed up emotionally, but do feel the need to go back to Castle Desiree’ and see what could happen for Marcus and me. ”

I made my grand entrance. “ Return to that wretched dwelling and I’ll send your soul packing! ” Nancy shook her head from side to side, but my hellish laughter permeated her entire being. “ If you think you can rid yourself of me in one fell swoop, then you’re sadly mistaken. ”

She and Desiree’ spoke of their love for Marcus and my thoughts turned to revenge against all three of them.

Nancy gave Angelo her hand and he helped her off the bed.
“ Angelo, I’m feeling back to normal. ”

I filled her senses with the unmistakable scent of Night Blooming Jasmine.
“ Ducky, it’s gotten to the point where you wouldn’t know normal if it came up and shoved you off a cliff into the wild blue yonder! ”

Nancy gathered her wits. “ Thank you for the marvelous dinner last night and the grand tour, Angelo. ” She paused for a moment. “ I need to talk to Adrian before I leave. ”

Angelo was polite, but cool. “ I’m very pleased that you’ve visited my humble home, but Adrian is still resting from last night’s festivities. I’ll make sure he knows the reason for your departure to Castle Desiree’ . ” Nancy’s heart lurched in horror as the intensity of my feelings for Phillippe stirred inside her soul. Even though she wanted a future with Marcus, she still wanted the danger of a relationship with Adrian. “ If you wish to contact him, here’s my private number. ” He handed Nancy a slip of paper, then walked out the door, his footsteps echoing down the hallway.

Gustav appeared at Nancy’s door. “ Your bags are all packed, Countess. We’ll leave whenever you’re ready to go. ”

That thought made my stomach churn, and those feelings filtered into Nancy’s misgivings. She clutched Valera’s hand and sank into a chair. “ Countess Nancy, focus on breathing. ” After she regained her composure, Valera clasped a pure gold bracelet around her wrist; hanging from its center was a black-mirrored, flat teardrop amulet.

Nancy gazed at her reflection, but couldn’t see me. “ Now turn it over. ” We both expected to see nothing more than Nancy’s features again, but Marcus stared back at us. He looked forlorn, a man deprived of everything near and dear to him, while Nancy felt like weeping on the spot, wanting to relieve him of all his misery. Their suffering brought a bit of mirth to my heart. Life had many unexpected twists and turns and if I could contribute the least little bit of heartache to their situation, maybe a trip to Castle Desiree’ wouldn’t be such a bad idea.

Valera’s explanation about the amulet surprised and pleased me. “ You’ll

always be able to see your face on one side and the countenance of your beloved on the other. The obsidian stone is favored for its access to many dimensions of soul retrieval.” Phillipe was the only soul that came to mind as we walked downstairs.

Angelo waited at the door for us. “ Countess Nancy, it’s been my ultimate pleasure to have met you.” Although he held her hand and kissed her on the cheek, he looked straight past her into the depths of my soul. “ Do come back to see me.”

He was gone in an instant, but not before slipping a note into Nancy’s palm. I paid scant attention to anything until she retrieved the piece of paper. ‘Guard against taking reckless chances by believing that new beginnings will solve all your past problems. Your past presents various opportunities to discover your future.’ I knew exactly what it meant, but needed time to formulate a plan.

After a few minutes of being on the road Gustav pulled off the main highway into a small parking lot of glass fronted buildings, mentioning something about the car motor overheating. He got out, then poked and prodded the area underneath the hood. “ Why don’t you and Valera go window shopping?”

One store in particular caught Nancy’s eye; Ye Eald Bok Sceoppa. The place was crammed from floor to ceiling with numerous books on various topics. Nancy told the owner she was mainly interested in family histories and diaries and Mr. Simmons spoke in a hushed whisper. “ I do have a private collection I’d like to show you.” We followed him to a large office. “ I’ve traveled to national and international antique auctions and have been fortunate enough to pick up many personal belongings and novelties for a mere pittance.” Tucked away in the corner was an old steamer trunk with the initials ADA inscribed in gold lettering on the side. “ I’ve glanced through the items and although they’re nice, they’re not my usual fare. Maybe you’d consider taking it off my hands for \$100?”

Valera didn’t hesitate, but handed him a crisp \$100 bill and he hauled it out to the car. Gustav unlocked the luggage compartment for him and Nancy asked Valera if she knew what was inside the trunk. “ No more so than you do, but I’ve never been one to pass up a gift horse, so to speak.” Her eyes twinkled and I had a sneaking suspicion she’d already seen the contents.

Desiree' piped up, clouding my thoughts. " Nancy, the Great Goddess led us here for this very purpose; the contents of this trunk will supply both of us with answers to many questions, if it belongs to who I think it does! " I was positive it housed our cousin Annelle's belongings.

Desiree', Nancy and I wanted to plunge into the hidden articles, but Valera quashed that idea. My heart lurched, then settled into ironic satisfaction at Valera's next words. " Sher's expecting you for lunch, and you don't want to disappoint her, now do you? " Sheridan reminded me of the wicked witch in the Hansel and Gretel fairytale; she'd more than likely be eating Nancy and Desiree' for dessert!

Gustav slammed the hood and we were on our way. The landscape changed into unfamiliar territory and I was bored to tears with Nancy's wishy-washy attitude. When the castle came into view, Desiree' was ecstatic. " It's good to finally be home! Stop being a whining ninny, Nancy. Marcus will be overjoyed at your arrival. "

I couldn't hold my peace. " Too bad others think your appearance puts a damper on their activities! " Sher stood at the frontdoor entrance, just the way I remembered her. " That smile is so frozen on her face you'd have to use an ice pick to remove it. " Nancy wanted to gag me, but I disappeared behind the backdrop curtain.

Sher wrapped her arms around Nancy in a crushing bearhug. " We're happy that you decided to return. Life hasn't been the same since you've been gone. "

" Thank you for your warm welcome, Sher. I've definitely missed being here at Castle Desiree'. "

I made a quick entrance as Nancy looked away. " Looks like someone's moving in permanently. " Sheridan caught my thoughts and her scowl transferred itself to me, leaving Nancy to wonder where she fit in to the scheme of things.

Lunch was underway when Nancy mustered her courage. " Sher, how is Marcus doing? "

“ He’s confused and quite angry with himself, because he thinks that true love has eluded him all his life. ”

“ Except Miss Sher seems to think he can find it right underneath his nose, and I’m not talking about you, Ducky! ” Nancy had no idea if my words were truth or lies.

“ When Desiree’ came back she had changed so much, he didn’t recognize or want the kind of love she offered. ” That news confused me. “ And Bethanie is the love he thought would last a lifetime. ” Sher continued her spiel. “ Nancy, you’re a horse of a different color. Marcus found his life’s purpose after meeting you and your future will be assured if you can in fact, cure him. ”

Sheridan was a wolf in sheep’s clothing. “ She knows how to keep you off-guard; after your argument with Marcus, Sher was quite certain you’d never return to Castle Desiree’. She doesn’t believe that Marcus feels any real love for you, but has his own agenda; to use you, then toss you away. One guess as to who’ll be in charge of your body, then. ” Nancy wanted to ask what I was babbling about. “ She might accomplish that feat in the coming days and then have Marcus all to herself...once again. ” I left Nancy to face this audition alone and positioned myself in the balcony.

Nancy decided that honesty was the best policy as conflicting emotions danced inside her head like a three-ring circus. Did Marcus really love her or was she just a substitute for me, his precious Bethanie?

“ Sher, I’m taking my life one day at a time because I don’t know what the future holds in store for Marcus and me. ” Nancy took a deep cleansing breath, then realized she was famished. Another sure sign of pregnancy.

“ Can we take a walk outside after we eat? I have tons of energy to spare. ”

Sher said, “ Of course we can. The grounds have many nature trails to explore. ”

“ Or have snares and traps set in plain sight for the unsuspecting victim. ” My breath was a thin vapor in the wind and Nancy almost caught my name.

Sher told the cook they were going for a stroll and would return before dinner. The woodland path wound through pine trees and holly bushes.

“ These are called Dragon Lady Holly and are favored by Hella Dracon, the Imperial Goddess. ” Sheridan fingered the bright red berries, her feverish expression reminding me of the night she pushed Desiree’ into Coltsfoot Canyon. “ The blood of her living sacrifices adorns these bushes. ” Nancy gave her a questioning look just before Sher changed her attitude into friend and confidante, pointing out other holly breeds; sky pencil, dark purple halla, and September gem. They came to a shadowed grove of green-leaved oak trees that surrounded a large spring of cold clear water. Wild mistletoe decorated the tree branches and in front of the well was a bench carved from natural stone. They sat down and Sheridan grasped Nancy’s hand in a vice-like grip. “ I really want everything to work out for you and my brother, so I’m pleading with you to stay and let him prove his love for you is real. ” Her voice dripped sincerity.

I listened in wry amusement to their conversation.

“ I don’t make commentments I don’t intend to keep. ” Nancy thought the fragrance of Mother Nature was a safe haven and sighed in complete contentment. “ As my soul drifts freely on the air currents, it becomes one with the universe. ”

The smile on Sher’s lips belied the contempt in her eyes. “ You’re a poet whose words can soothe the savage beast. Nancy. ” She drew closer and I backed away. “ I’ve always wanted a sister and I’ll let you in on a little secret; we’re already related by blood and marrying my brother can only make our relationship that much stronger. ” Sher had both of us bewildered. “ Let me clarify this for you. Marcus and I have always been close, but when Desiree’ turned him into a vampire, she changed my life as well. ” Shapes darkened considerably as the sun faded in the west.

“ One warm spring day Marcus helped me retrieve a special scarf that had gotten tangled in the hedgerow thicket. He ended up with many deep scratches on his hands and used that scarf to wipe away his oozing blood. ” She stopped to gage Nancy’s reaction to her words. “ Some of his blood transferred itself to me and suffice it to say I became a vampire in the process. Marcus has never forgiven himself or Desiree’ for turning us into what she was and is. He’s supplied me with just enough of your life force so I can live as long as he does. ”

I knew there had to be more to the story and was going to add my 2 cents worth, but Desiree’ beat me to the punch. “ Even though you’re becoming

wise in some areas, beware of lies hidden in partial truth. ”

“ I might be selfish, but if you can cure Marcus with your innocent blood, then you can certainly cure me. ” Sheridan sobbed and carried on, but Nancy looked through my eyes and only saw tears of the crocodile persuasion. Twilight slowly replaced blue sky and the air held a sudden chill. Sher regained her composure. “ We must return to the castle before Marcus wakes. ”

Nancy walked back along the path at a snail’s pace, and thought she heard Desiree’s voice; Sher did a pretty good imitation from out of sight. “ Tonight we’ll offer homage to Kermes Twa and Aequalis, this being their Annual Winter Union Feast Day. To honor them we’ll make a candle light procession to their Holiest of Shrines, which you’ve just visited. You’ll need to pick leaves and berries from the Dragon Lady holly bush and collect wild mistletoe sprigs which grow on the oak trees by the sacred well. Our Ceremonial Sacrifices will be laid on the stone alter. Valera, CeCe, you and I will celebrate after we’ve seen Marcus, of course. ”

Sher fled the scene and Nancy lingered in the cool forest air, weighing her conflicting feelings about Marcus. Desiree’s laugh wasn’t harsh. “ Nancy, you think too much. Let things happen as they will tonight with Marcus. ‘Hwaet aefre welken beon, welken beon’; whatever will be, will be. ”

“ Where’s the sarcastic attitude I’ve grown to know and love, Desiree’? Are you taking on aspects of my nature? ” Nancy sighed. “ What you’ve said is accurate, but I don’t have any set ideas when it comes to Marcus. ” I knew she wanted to add Adrian’s name to her list as well.

“ Hrrumph! ” I got a kick out of Nancy’s assumptions about Desiree’. “ I thought you could use some sound advice. Even though he’s hurt you deeply, what you want in your innermost heart and soul is to be with Marcus. ”

She disappeared when Sher showed up. “ Valera is upset with you and so am I! Can’t you see the sun’s already set? ”

They quickly ran to the castle and were met by Valera, who scolded Nancy as if she were a small child that couldn’t be trusted. “ Give me one good reason why you stayed in the forest for such a long time? I was ready to let

Gustav lead a search party for you. ” She inspected Nancy with an eagle eye. “ Those woods are dangerous for a girl alone and if an accident had occurred...well, Marcus isn't a forgiving man. ”

“ Valera, I'm sorry if I scared you, but Desiree' thinks I should go with the flow and let nature take its course with him. ” She kissed Valera on the cheek, then headed towards the shower. “ I don't want Marcus to think I'm a ragamuffin! ” That statement put all three of them in good spirits, while I thought of bringing down their house of cards.

Nancy turned to leave and gut-wrenching sickness flooded my heart. Desiree' egged her into going straightaway to the room she shared with Marcus, but we breathed a sigh of relief as he was no where in sight. She hastily climbed into the shower, but when she stepped out of the tub a towel was placed in her hands. “ Thank you, Valera, or is that CeCe? ”

She patted her face and a male voice said, “ You're wrong on both counts, My Dear. ”

My feelings infused Nancy's mind; she became flustered and blushed profusely as Marcus relieved her of the towel and began feasting on her. That's when I made a quick exit.

Someone shook Nancy's legs, rousing us from a restful sleep. I clouded her vision and all she saw was a hazy figure near the foot of the bed, but I heard Sher's disguised voice rasp, “ Countess Nancy, Kermes Twa and Aequalis require your presence at their Holy Shrine. ” She didn't bother to turn on the light as she handed Nancy's clothes and boots to her. “ Their Annual Winter Union Feast Day begins at midnight and you'll worship and offer homage to them at their sacred well. ”

When Nancy stood up, her head spun in dizzying circles and she swayed back and forth. Sher steadied her shoulder and applied something cool and sticky to her breast, then told Nancy to open her mouth. The taste was sweet and refreshing and Nancy felt an immediate burst of energy.

She walked along the path that led to the old oak grove and Sher's shadowy shape flickered into angelic view when she lit black candles that were laid

around the sacred well's edge. She raised her arms and offered praises to the Imperial Goddess...

“ As I lay the candles down one by one
The flames of love are sent to you
The darkness is our love for you
Their blending is our inspiration
The balance a continuation
A well of deepness our desire. ”

I felt a sense of foreboding as Nancy's eyes adjusted to the dim light. The alter was layered with holly and mistletoe; green leaves on the bottom, and their red and white berries interspersed on top. Nancy knelt before the well, filled with words of adoration.

“ Great Goddess Kermes Twa
Eternal virgin of springtime
You are signified by the red of the holly berries
The red blood of woman
I am blessed to receive Your gift of life

Aequalis, Great God Of Balance
Your sacredness evolves from the oak tree
You are signified by the white of the mistletoe berries
The white semen of man
Marcus, the giver of that life. ”

Sheridan spoke. “ The hour has arrived. ”

Nancy rose from her knees, mesmerized by the sparkling stars set against the sky's velvet background. She thought her life was in perfect balance, but darkling forces induced a swirling dance as her body moved ever closer to the flickering flames surrounding the pool of water. Nothing mattered to her soul except the rising mist of evil and soon she hovered above the well, then plunged into its icy depths. She sank deeper and faster as extreme exhalation drowned her spirit, but my adrenaline rush slapped her back to consciousness. Kermes Twa screamed, “ Save your life and that of your unborn children! ”

Nancy's lungs were near to bursting as I pushed her feet off the rocky

bottom; she broke the water's surface, leaving death behind. I was exhausted after her ordeal, and decided a much needed rest was in order.

Saturday Afternoon

I woke to flavors of lemon, ginger, and cherries as the distinct taste of Adrian's life force flooded Nancy's blood stream. Strong warm hands lifted her to a sitting position and I was a fleeting vision as her eyes concentrated on Marcus. He smoothed her hair, then held her close. "You scared me. I thought I was going to lose everything that matters most."

"One would think you'd already died and been buried!" Nancy finally caught my name. "I could give you a fitting eulogy just like the one I gave at Desiree's memorial service." I broke out in screaming gales of laughter. "Marcus can't afford to lose you now since he's gone to the trouble of releasing my spirit back into his life."

Nancy tried her best to push me offstage. "Marcus, you're a man who gives his all and there's no other place I'd rather be than in your arms."

My voice was filled with relentless hatred. "So you say, but there are a million other places I'd rather be and a certain other person I'd rather you be, such as me! Marcus wants me, more than he ever wanted you and I fully intend to be the lead actress as soon as I take care of the bit players on this so called stage that houses your mind." I gloated. "My spirit was called into your world when Marcus cleansed your back with the lavender soap. The memories he made available were like disjointed dreams, clearly lacking in time continuity; all the fields of lavender and lilac bloomed the summer before we had our engagement party and were seen through rose-colored glasses that blinded him to the reality of my wants and needs." I whispered conspiratorially. "The second I saw Phillippe's face in the sunlight at Desiree's graveside I knew he was an angel sent down from heaven and I gave him my heart and soul, spurning her sloppy seconds."

Nancy wondered if she were losing her mind after Marcus planted the seed that she'd tried to cause him ultimate hurt by harming herself.

“ Marcus, if I really wanted you to suffer, I wouldn't have come back to Castle Desiree', period. I went to pay homage to the god and goddess I worship and offered my sacrifice of fervent prayers to them at their sacred dwelling place, hoping to make things right between us. ”

“ Wandering through dark woods alone isn't conducive to safety or longevity; even you should know that.” Marcus paced back and forth, becoming more perturbed when Nancy told him she thought Valera had come to her room after he left.

Valera was upset with that notion. “ Countess Nancy, don't you know how special you are to all of us who love you? Your body was in no shape to walk a few feet, much less traipse for miles over rough terrain. ”

Nancy thought of Valera as a mother figure and kissed the back of her hand. “ It was a stranger's voice telling me I was strong when I wasn't, then manipulating me into thinking I had a friend to guide me in the right direction. ” Then she mumbled to herself, “ Someone who knew the rituals very well and wanted to see me dead, but why? ”

I heard Nancy's underlying concerns and added drama and spice to her mixed bag of emotions. “ I see the wicked thoughts you have about yours truly, but I swear on my mother's holy grave I had nothing to do with that night, although it was a great plan which almost worked. ” I seethed with glee. “ It boils down to jealousy and spite and much as I hate you and Desiree' co-existing in such close proximity to me, if you die, then so do I! ”

Speaking of the devil, Sher walked in with a brilliant smile on her angelic face. “ I'm so glad you're still with us, Nancy. It won't be long until we become sisters. ”

" Now there's one who hides her jealous nature with the best of them! "

" Sher's not jealous, she hates Desiree' for turning Marcus and her into vampires. " Nancy didn't know Sher the way I did.

" You're so wrong, Ducky! Miss Sher's jealous of anyone who gets close to Marcus. " Nancy dozed off when she realized Desiree' didn't know I'd come to stay for a while.

Sher's grip strengthened and a loud groan escaped from Nancy's lips.." If I hurt you, I'm sorry, Nancy, but as much as you need to rest, you don't need to sleep. "

" Maybe a tub filled with warm lavender scented water would help you out..of your body so I could take over the reins! Of course I'd have to replace that stench with Night Blooming Jasmine! " My gasps and giggles floated like fragrant bubbles, but burst when Desiree' made her grand entrance amidst swirling rose perfume.

Nancy yawned and stretched, then wiggled free of Sher's grasp. " Sher, you've always treated me like a member of your family. " I had no trouble casting doubts and suspicions into Nancy's head and she moved towards the brink of madness.

Shakes and shivers shook her body as her emotional state deteriorated and she grabbed hold of Marcus. " Stay with me, Nancy. Don't go back to where you've been.. " Sher and Valera faded into the background as the bedroom door opened then quietly closed. " Now that we're alone again, I'll make my feelings perfectly clear. There's no way in heaven's providence or hell's abode you can escape the inevitable..the whole sum of the addition and subtraction is a set value. You're my woman, the answer to solving my problem. "

" I was always terrible when it came to math..his $1+1$ will never $=2$, so he won't find what he requires with me! " Just a little needling point I thought she should know.

I prodded Nancy into saying, " Marcus, I'm thirsty. " As she drank more of the liquid Valera had supplied, she choked and sputtered, finding it hard to concentrate.

" That's right Sweetie..let me take over so you can rest for a while. I might even consider bringing you in as an understudy one of these days! " My cruelest intentions had almost come to fruition.

Marcus and Desiree' came to Nancy's rescue and I exited stage left, until she fell into the far reaches of sleep. She'd wake before dawn's new light and I knew what must be accomplished for my own survival. I quickly drank the almost full tumbler of Adrian's blood so Phillippe's spirit would circulate throughout Nancy's bloodstream. Adrian would hear her life force calling and this time around I'd allow him to partake of her blood. Nancy and Adrian would fade away and Phillippe and I would live once again. She woke to darkness..her amulet clinked against the empty glass near the telephone and she turned on the bedside lamp. Remembered thoughts about the polished black obsidian reverberated throughout her mind. ' Nancy, the amulet doesn't lie when it comes to the truth of feelings..you'll always be able to see your face on one side and the countenance of your beloved on the other. ' I gazed through her eyes into its mirrored surface, and Marcus glowered..she turned it over and Phillippe hid behind Adrian's smiling eyes.

Without further ado, she dialed Angelo's private number and Adrian answered on the first ring. " I've been hoping to hear your beautiful voice, Nancy. I've been feeling under the weather for the last couple of days, but now I'm right as rain. " He laughed and her heart did flipflops.

" I've missed you, Adrian..before I left your uncle's house, I wanted to speak with you, but Angelo said you didn't need to be disturbed. " Tears of joy fell down her cheeks. " Can you come pick me up at the bottom of the hill that leads to Castle Desiree'? " She knew it'd take him an hour or more to reach the road.

" Of course, I'm on my way. " He hung up and she found a pair of black trousers and dark shirt, reminding me of the items I wore when I met Phillippe at the apple orchard. Nancy hastily donned them, laced up her hiking boots, then made her way down the back stairs. Fat snowflakes fell as she ran across the driveway into the woodland's shadowed edge and trudged for miles and miles. She became disoriented as the mid-winter weather took a turn for the worse and she decided to sit for just a few minutes worth of rest. The freezing snow blanketed her body in its deceptive warmth and she curled herself into a ball and drifted off to sleep.

I woke with a start, thinking I was safe inside Angelo's house with Adrian,

but Marcus's castle bedroom stared back at me and it was as if I'd never left. I threw back the covers in an uncontrollable rage. The phone was missing and the closet and dresser drawers were empty! I parted the casement drapes, but iron bars prevented me from escaping. Last of all I tried the door handle, but it was locked from the outside. My screams bounced off the walls and a second later Valera held me tight against her breast.. " Calm down, Nancy..everything'll be all right. " She patted my back. " Marcus is too upset to talk to you at the moment.. "

" Why would he be upset..he's not the one being held prisoner inside the ivory tower! "

" Sit down and take a deep breath. " She held Nancy's amulet in the palm of her hand, gazed at both sides, then dangled it in front of me. " Focus on the beauty of blackness, fall into her depths. "

She called my name, but I hid deeper than Desiree' so I couldn't be extracted from Nancy's body..Valera cut the hypnosis session short when Marcus strode in, his eyes hellbent with fury.

I laughed outloud and departed, stage left, so to speak.

He applied a vice grip to Nancy's shoulders..she whimpered in fright when he deliberately unbuttoned her top and sank his fangs into the upper portion of her left breast. Being near naked in front of Marcus wasn't to my liking and I goaded Nancy into clawing and scratching with all the fury of a woman scorned, but she was no match against his strength. His fangs dripped red and he expressed self-satisfaction.." Bethanie, it's safe for you to come out. "

I did and immediately slapped him across his smirking face..he stood there in shocked silence as I ran through the door. My screams had brought Adrian and Angelo to the hallway..I didn't question the hows or whys, but said a prayer of thanks as I was embraced in the arms of the man I loved. " Adrian I want to leave this place..it's not my home.." I knew Adrian wasn't ready to accept me as Bethanie or himself as Phillipe.

" Nancy, are you all right? " He laid his hand on the bite marks, then gently buttoned my shirt, concern for my safety and well-being in his eyes.

Marcus snarled and barred his teeth. " Take your hands off of her..we're engaged to be married! "

" You're sadly mistaken Marcus..I'll never marry you. " I stayed as close to Adrian as I could.

" What're you talking about? "

" Marcus, you should've thought twice about resurrecting my spirit..Nancy's gone, Desiree's gone, and soon I'll be gone, leaving you to your misery once again. "

Adrian couldn't fathom the gist of our conversation and I took that opportunity to sink my fangs into his neck. Marcus watched in stunned silence as Adrian kissed my blooded lips.." Bethanie. "

Phillipe had returned to my heart and soul. " Marcus, meet my husband, Phillipe Connor. Do you remember how sick I was at our engagement party..I wasn't physically ill, but heartsick at having Papa arrange a marriage to you when I was in love with Phillipe. " I thought of stopping, but the words came tumbling out. " As a matter of fact, I was already pregnant with his baby when I ran off to marry him. "

Marcus's face turned grey in bitter defeat as he absorbed that thought.." I want to leave this place and spend the rest of my life with you, Phillipe. "

Phillipe's knees buckled as he suffered bloodloss repercussions and Angelo helped him to the bedroom. " My Dear Girl, although I'd be happy for you and Phillipe to stay at my home in Springfield until everything is sorted out, venturing back into the howling winter storm would be dangerous..if you don't believe me, look out the window. "

Angelo's words were true and I sat down by Phillipe to bide my time, laying my head on his chest to listen to his steady heartbeat. Something sharp pricked my arm and I tried my best to stay awake, but quickly wandered into the land of oblivian.

My dreams were terrifying..Desiree' had deserted me and Marcus was angry beyond reason. The more I tried to explain the tug-of-war inside my soul, the madder he became, until he snapped in a vicious rage. That dream faded and was replaced by a young girl spreading violets on an unmarked grave..she was carried off by the grim reaper and forced to live in his underworld hideaway for eternity. I woke to the sound of gentle snoring. " Marcus, " I breathed his name and his lips captured mine in a burning kiss of desire.

He embraced me, then murmured,
" I love you, Nancy, and I'm so sorry about this morning..I made a huge mistake by trying to bring back the past. "

Desiree's presence was unexpected and I spoke outloud. " Nothing like nightmare visions to haunt the soul. "

" Why I ever thought she really loved me boggles my mind, but I won't let her hurt you again. " Marcus mumbled under his breath, but loud enough for me to hear.

I assumed he was speaking of Desiree', but she cackled in good humor.
" Nancy, did you think I slept through this morning's colorful events? I watched all the sordid details unfold from my front row seat. " She paused and slapped my knee. " Good grief..an overdose of Adrian's blood has fogged your brain, but Kermes Twa says Marcus will know about our intertwined lives soon enough. "

I shook my head in confusion. " I don't know what you're talking about, Marcus..did something happen I need to be aware of? "

" Yes, Nancy..when I came to check on you this morning, you'd already left the premises without a word to anyone. I was worried because of the approaching winter storm, so Gustav and I searched the immediate area, but didn't find a trace..we were surprised when Adrian and his Uncle drove up and said you'd called them hours before, wanting to leave Castle Desiree'. The four of us walked the edge of the woods alongside the main road and finally found you less than a mile from here covered by a blanket of snow. " His emotions gave way and he cried at length, then gained a semblance of control. Marcus took a few extra moments to gather his thoughts before he proceeded with his story. " I'd studied the dark arts and knew that releasing

Desiree's spirit from her portrait would open the pathway for Bethanie's soul to return as well, because twins are so closely linked through mind and blood. " He explained what had occurred when Bethanie was in control of my mind. " She didn't give a damn about anything or anyone except being with her husband, Phillip. " I knew he was talking about Adrian and my heart cringed. " She almost killed you in the process. " His countenance portrayed a man whose illusions had finally been shattered. " I always blamed Desiree' for making Bethanie leave, but that doesn't absolve her from other numerous sins and mistakes.."

His voice trailed off as Desiree' came to the forefront. " Such as the sin of loving you too much? " She had the good sense to stop before she said anything further.

He spoke Desiree's name as the Great Goddess filtered her wisdom through my mouth. " Marcus, when it comes to love we can either choose to put on rose-colored blinders or see and accept the person for who and what they truly are. "

" I'm coming to realize that in my own life, Nancy. " He surprised me with his next statement. " I need the truth from you, right here, right now. "

" Which truth might that be, Marcus? "

" The truth of you and Desiree'. Where do the pieces begin to fit and fall into place..where does your love start and her hatred of me end? "

" It'll be all right, Nancy..Kermes Twa says this is the given time for each of us to learn and heal. " Desiree' was right.

" In the beginning, your concerns about Desiree' were well founded..her hatred of me rivaled her feelings for you, Marcus, but things have changed.."
He rolled his eyes in disbelief. " She could've taken full control and replaced me anytime she wanted to, but I'm still here and the fact of the matter is I love her like the sister I never had. "

A knock sounded at the door and Sheridan swept in, her eyes bright with excitement. She set down a tray that was loaded with food and drinks. " It's so wonderful to have the castle filled with people..tonight's the perfect time to formally announce your engagement. "

I was wary of her motives, but Marcus said, " Nancy, you'll be able to clear the air about who you really love. "

" I'm glad you agreed, Marcus, because I've already put my plans into action. " Sheridan hugged him, then kissed both my cheeks.

Desiree' whispered in my ear, " Sheridan presents the perfect image of Judas Iscariot. That was a double kiss of death, Nancy..one for you and one for me. Drink up and she'll rue the day. "

Marcus handed me a glass filled to the brim with red liquid, then made a toast..

" One for you and one for me
a double kiss of love inspires
t'is not to endings we aspire
but new beginnings meant to be "

We entwined our arms and hands and drank from each other's goblets. That didn't sit very well with Sheridan and she fled the scene when Marcus released his grip and the glass shattered into a million pieces at my feet. He spoke, but I didn't recognize his voice. " Desiree', I always thought we'd be open and honest with each other so every letter I received from you filled my heart with joy..my soul was impressed with your words of love and I hoped to ask for your hand in marriage when I heard news that you'd arrived in Paris to do your Christmas shopping. It was arranged for us to meet after the university play was finished, but my heart was crushed beyond repair when I was informed of your marriage to Count Marcus. I realized your love-letters were sent while you were already married to him and I hated you so much that I didn't stay and listen to your explanation, but I paid for that sin when your Uncle Joshua told me of your untimely death. " He winced in pain. " I made a special trip to Springfield to offer my condolences to your family and encountered your sister, Bethanie, at your gravesite. She was strewing roses on the fresh-turned earth and for the briefest moment I thought it was you, come back from the dead to haunt me. " Marcus smiled. " For me, it was love at first sight..when I learned of Bethanie's engagement to the very man who'd taken you away from me, I knew I had to make her mine. She'd ride into town with Marcus and her father, but while they worked, she and I played, talked and laughed, growing closer day by day. How well I remember the very first time we made love. " He sighed in utter

bliss. " Bethanie came to New York City to do her Christmas shopping and magic sparkled in the air. She said she'd slipped away from Marcus for the entire afternoon and wanted to be with me..she was a virgin in every way and I was blessed to show her all my love and adoration, but the best was yet to come. On the very night of her engagement party to Marcus, she left everything and everyone she knew to be with me. What man could ask for more proof of love than that? We boarded the midnight train to San Francisco and Dame Fortune shined her light on us when Bethanie told me she was pregnant with my child and I was more than blessed when she brought our son Phillip into the world. On our third wedding anniversary I arranged for a babysitter and surprised Bethanie with a sailboat trip to a nearby island..the day was perfect, but on the way home a storm swept over the boat and Bethanie and I met our watery death in benthos.."

Marcus shuddered, then came out of his trance, mad and ill-at-ease. He didn't bother speaking to me, but called upon Desiree'. " Is it true you led him on, even after we professed our love with the vows of marriage? "

I heard her thoughts. " For the longest time, he's always believed the worst of me..sometimes warranted, but I never deceived him that way. " He shook my shoulders and she spoke up. " It's true I was fond of Phillipe, but my heart, soul, and body always belonged to you, Marcus..I've never given them to another man and I never will. "

He crushed his lips to ours and tasted our blended love, but still didn't trust her. " What of those eighteen months when you let all your loved ones believe you were dead, Desiree'? I was devastated! " His eyes were wells of reflected fury.

He gripped my arms and held his breath. Her indignation was a match for his anger. " Not upset enough to rescue me from that hellhole of a Parisian prison, Marcus! "

He seemed perplexed and talked as if to himself.." Sheridan told me you and she'd gone shopping, but had decided to go your separate ways and meet for supper in your hotel room. She sent me a telegram saying she'd waited all night, but you'd never returned. I came straightaway to Paris and spared no expense in trying to find you.."

" Yes, but it wasn't enough Marcus! " Desiree' told him the story of how

she'd become a vampire, then spoke with ripened bitterness. " Those evil men perpetrated their atrocities upon my innocent flesh and turned me into a freak of nature..if it weren't for CeCe and Valera, I would've chosen death a million times over. Valera nursed me with herbal remedies and when I accepted the Great Goddess and her teachings, there were obligations to fulfill and debts to repay. " Desiree's laugh held no humor. " Did you ever hear of the Rose Queen of Paris and the wonderful parties she threw? "

" Her name was plastered all over the New York society pages and many people were surprised when she left King Louie's Parisian high society and made a home for herself in New York City. " He cleared his throat. " Those who didn't receive invitations to her socials said she was responsible for the disappearance of a certain Duke and Cardinal who came to visit her. Not long after that she left town and was never heard from again. What does she have to do with you, Desiree'? "

Desiree' curtsied. " The Rose Queen at your service, Marcus. "

He bit his lip. " The papers branded you as a murdering whore! "

" I admit to no such thing..the Great Goddess that I worship and adore allowed me the sweetness of revenge and retribution against those men in Paris who made me what I am..in fact, I was able to rid France of many vile rats who preyed on young women such as myself. "

Marcus frowned. " And what of New York? "

She sighed in delight. " I retrieved my blood and soul from those two evilmongers on Christmas Day..I'd rank those unholy festivities a close second to our wedding day, Marcus. " She whirled around like a madwoman. " Did you know their sect originated at Castle Desiree'? "

" Castle Desiree'? What are you talking about? "

Kermes Twa intervened before Desiree' lost all that was near and dear to both of us. " Patience, Daughter..all will be revealed to him in time, but not by you. "

Desiree' evaded his question. " Tell me about you and Bethanie. "

Tears came to his eyes. " After four months, the authorities and detectives I'd hired said I should give up the search, but trying to find you consumed all my thoughts. I couldn't eat or drink and after two more months I knew I'd waste away if I didn't leave Paris. Even though you'd told me how much your father and sister hated you, I sailed to America so I could break the news to them in person. When I saw Bethanie for the first time, I was stunned by her resemblance to you, and my heart flooded with joy..every bit of love I ever felt for you was transferred into feelings for her. "

Understanding of what he'd done finally dawned on him and he continued.

" Your father invited me to stay at his house in Springfield, and little by little convinced me to have you declared legally dead, so I could move forward with my life. He and your sister prepared a memorial service in your honor while we waited for legal papers to arrive from Paris. Many people offered their condolences and were touched by Bethanie's tribute to you. " Marcus visualized her words. " ' When Desiree' left our home two years ago to finish school in France, we always thought she'd return and add her special brand of sparkle and zest to our lives, once more. Little did we know she'd marry, then be called to heaven to entertain the angels and keep my mother company. Desiree', we'll never forget you. ' Then she knelt and kissed your headstone. "

" I would've liked a front row seat to that scene of her saying good-bye and good riddance. " Desiree' interrupted.

" After the funeral, my heart began to heal and Bethanie and I spent wonderful hours together..walking in summer lavender fields and making many trips to the Coltsfoot Canyon Waterfalls. " Marcus sighed. " I thought I knew her so well. "

" Bethanie hated both of us for different reasons, Marcus. I came to understand her motivations through a vision I received from Kermes Twa. When Bethanie was sixteen, she stumbled across the family Bible my father had hidden away from us. My mother had listed names, birthdates and family trees in the front, but on a separate sheet of paper, she revealed the truth..Bethanie and I had different fathers. All of my life I was forced to share the blame for what my mother did. "

" Did you know the man who fathered you, Desiree'? "

" Yes, Marcus..it was my Uncle Joshua. Sometimes I think he knew and

that's why he took me into his house and home when my own father kicked me out. " She paused and smiled. " The Great Goddess says that's how the universe unfolds its mysteries..in leaving Springfield behind, I was introduced to the love of my life. " Desiree' kissed him and I felt the love they'd shared as man and wife. She whispered so that only I could hear.. " What Marcus feels for me is what he feels for you..accept and appreciate it, Nancy. "

" All the time you pretended to be Bethanie, there was something about you I couldn't quite put my finger on. I thought I was imagining things, but deep inside I always hoped..I even visited your grave and told you how much I loved and missed you, and the main reason I was marrying Bethanie was to be close to you. "

Desiree' wrapped her arms around his waist and stared into his eyes. " I know Marcus, because I followed you that night. Your words imprinted themselves into my soul and I knew that no matter what happened or how far I'd have to go, I'd keep you by my side and in my heart forever and always. "

" Yes, Desiree', both of us bore the weight of overwhelming guilt and pain..I hated the thought that I wanted you more than I ever wanted Bethanie. When we made love you couldn't keep yourself hidden from me and after I tasted your blood, I saw past your portrayal of her. "

" I never wanted you to become a vampire, Marcus..I just needed you to love me as Desiree' and not as Bethanie. I'm sorry for not trusting you with who and what I was. " Tears of sorrow and remorse fell down her cheeks.

" All my emotional baggage came crashing down as I played one of Mama's favorite songs on the piano at Joshua's house. I lost my mind to a strange madness and lost you in the process. " I emerged as she fell to pieces and slowly faded away.

" Desiree'? "

" Marcus, she needs time to regroup and recover from her confessions, but she genuinely loves you as much as I do. " I was physically exhausted and my body trembled. He sat me on his lap and I felt his warm embrace.

" Desiree' and I are part and parcel of each other Marcus..if you try and separate us, we'll both die. "

He kissed her lips while I lurked in the background, listening to their drivel spewing forth..Nancy, Desiree', and Marcus were entitled to nothing, while I was entitled to life and living!

I smiled in satisfaction as I drank another full glass of Adrian's blood, then yawned.

Marcus played right into my hands and gently laid my body on his bed. " If we're to become engaged tonight, you should rest. " He kissed my forehead and I took full control as Nancy slipped into unconsciousness. " Sleep well, my Darling. "

After Marcus left I made plans..first on the agenda was to find Sheridan so I could consume more of Adrian's blood to strengthen me before Nancy regained control. Sher came prancing in, then shut the door behind her. " I have a couple of items guaranteed to bring Adrian to your doorstep so your heart can call Phillipe to surface. "

I drained the liquid she gave me and felt my reality return.

The clothes I wore weren't conducive to winning Phillipe's love and I certainly wouldn't be caught dead wearing something of Nancy's. Sher unzipped the plastic bag she'd laid on the bed and I beheld the very same Barley Gold ballgown I'd worn the night of my engagement party to Marcus. How ironic was that? Sher focused on my thoughts.

" Don't worry about Marcus..he's dressing downstairs and he'll make his announcement at 8pm when everyone's gathered in the sitting room. " I laughed outloud as I caught the scent of Night Blooming Jasmine and knew it wouldn't be long until I saw Phillipe again. " Come relax in the bath I've drawn for you, Bethanie. "

Black candles lit the room, and eerie shadows flickered on the walls and ceiling. I stepped into the warm inviting water and Sher waved a beautiful red and black scarf in front of my eyes that reminded me of the carved figurehead on Papa's clippership named Sapphire Ocean. Her wind-tossed tresses were black as India ink and her lips the color of the scarlet tanager, curved in a come hither smile.

Sher began speaking in a strange tongue, but I understood every word she said..

" Hella Dracon, Imperial Goddess Divine, holy patron of witches
Theophanic Goddess of Blood and Revenge,
Close confidante of Blac Toth Snaca
As your repayment for my witching powers
and the bestowal of everlasting life
my offering and thanksgiving to you will be
Nancy's firstborn, the fruit of her productive womb
to raise as one of your own..

You have given this body to the darkness of my care
Bethanie, from now until forever you'll be forced to do my bidding..
heeding every word and nuance in their rightful setting,
until the fitting deed is done..
the spell is cast, but you'll only last until the babe is born. "

She paused for a few minutes, then shook my shoulder. " Wake up,
Bethanie..did you enjoy your nap? "

Hackles rose in my heart and soul..I'd get my own revenge on all of them
and fooling Sheridan would be the icing on the cake. Putting my acting
abilities to the test, I stretched and yawned. " I've never felt better, Sher. "

I dried off then slipped into silken undergarments that Marcus would never
see or touch. My floral brocade ballgown glimmered with elegant black
sequins, and I thought of Regina as Sher tightly laced the bodice into a
perfect fit. I stood in front of the hallway mirror as Sher placed a golden
tiara on my head that swept dark curly waves away from my face. Lavender
eyes stared at me until she covered them with deep emerald green contacts
and I looked a tiny bit like myself of long ago with long black lashes. And
last, but not least, I was adorned with the jewelry Phillipe had given to me
on the day of our baby boy's birth. Sher said, " I'll go down and tell everyone
that you'll make your grand entrance in a few minutes. "

I laughed. " Fireworks will be heard all the way to Springfield and back. "

As I entered the sitting room, Marcus gasped and his face turned red in
rage..he grabbed my shoulders and spun me around. " What's the meaning of
this? "

" Let go of me and you'll find out along with everyone else. " He clinched his fists as I walked over to Adrian, threw my arms around his neck and kissed him for all he was worth. " Do you love me enough to take me away from this place and marry me? "

He was surprised, but pleased as punch. " I've never met a woman like you before..my uncle prepared me for your engagement to Count Marcus, but you've known from the moment I set eyes on you, I loved you with all my heart and soul. " The silver ring he slipped on the 3rd finger of my right hand was beyond breathtaking in its pure simplicity..in the middle was a tear shaped Herkimer Diamond, surrounded by eight Apache Tears. I leaned over to partake of his blood, but he put me off as visions of Phillippe faded. " Nancy, the Apache Tears are an opaque form of obsidian.." Adrian looked me straight in the eye.." a Sagittarius stone that lets my wolf spirit retrieve souls, while the diamond signifies the purity of my love for you and Desiree'. "

I'd waited years to give the performance of my life..I clawed at Adrian with all the fury of a woman scorned, called him hurtful, hateful names, then hurled the ring back in his face. I screamed, ranted and raved until all my emotions were spent, then I sat and cried as Nancy's body crumpled to the floor.

I woke up to complete darkness. The bed I lay in wasn't goosedown soft or warm and when I tried to move, my arms and legs wouldn't budge an inch. Desiree' made her presence known. " What in heaven's name is wrong with you, Nancy? Why aren't we up and about, getting dressed for our engagement party to Marcus? "

I focused our eyes on a little red dot in the corner. " The only answer I can give is that the camera's watching our every non-movement, Desiree'. " I snorted, rolled my eyes and waited for heaven or hell to arrive and tell me what was going on.

The room was lit in small increments and I saw the source of our problem. I

was in a hospital bed with my arms and legs in tight restraints, while an IV steadily dripped fluids into my left hand. The room was soundproofed by black padded walls so other people wouldn't be frightened if I chose to pitch a hissiefit. " That would be more along the lines of a Bethanie fit! " I was glad Desiree' still had her warped sense of humor.

The only good thing about my circumstances was the fact I could see the door..as if on cue, the handle clicked and Mark's friendly face came into view. " I'm glad somebody knows my whereabouts and can clue me in on what's happened. "

He kissed my right cheek, then smoothed my hair. " I'm glad to see you're awake. " He stepped backwards, as an older lady with grey cropped hair moved towards the left side of my bed. " Nancy, I want you to meet my mother, Dr. Marion Franco..she'll be handling your case. "

The moment Mark mentioned his mother's name, Desiree' pulled at the restraints with all her might and screamed incoherent phrases. I had no way of calming her down, but Dr. Franco adjusted the drip on my IV and Desiree' shrunk into a tiny ball. Mark was no where in sight as the good doctor eyed me with motherly concern. " Although we've never had the pleasure of meeting, Mark's told me what a wonderful caring person you are. " She paused and smiled. " Do you know why you're here in Melhana Sanitarium? "

" For my sanity and everyone else's peace of mind? " I laughed in spite of myself.

The chair she sat in was old and threadbare, but looked comfortable and I assumed she was going to question me at length. " Do you remember anything about yesterday's events? "

I told her that Marcus and I had a long conversation which cleared the air, then I took a nap. " If it's morning then I slept through my engagement party to him. "

" Not quite, by all accounts. I'm told you caused a spectacular uproar by rejecting the affections of Count Marcus Canossa and professing your undying love and devotion for Adrian Connor. " She stopped to gauge my reaction. " But when he said I love you with all my heart and soul, Nancy,

you tried to scratch his eyes out with your fingernails. " She let that info sink in.

" Bethanie's the only person who'd do that.." The words tumbled out before I could cut them off.

She wrote that down on her clipboard. " I talked to everyone who attended the party. " She looked straight at me as she mentioned names. " Count Marcus, Sheridan Canossa, Adrian Connor and his Uncle Angelo, Valera Jesamain and her daughter Cecelia gave pretty much the same account and not one of them mentioned a Bethanie being there. "

I looked away and sighed. " Nancy, I can only help you if you let me..I'd like to show you something. " She buzzed an intercom. " Bring the tv and vcr in, please. "

An orderly brought the requested items in and set the tape in motion. I watched Marcus carry me through the sanitarium's double doors, closely followed by Valera, Adrian, and Angelo. Over and over again I screamed, " I'm Bethanie and I want to be with Phillippe! " A needleprick calmed me down, but Bethanie's presence remained. " If you don't release me, quite a few somebodies are going to die, starting with Nancy and Desiree', and then my little secret! " She looked frantic and sounded terrified..I didn't know if she was acting or not and wondered how far she'd go to get back at all of us?

My mind swirled and twirled with horrendous thoughts and imaginings, but Kermes Twa put my soul at ease. " Your destiny is unfolding, but you must obey me in order for Desiree' and Bethanie to end their hatred of each other and for you and Marcus to have what you've always dreamed of. " Then she called on Desiree'. " My most precious daughter, Desiree', this Dr. Franco is nothing like her ancestor. Trust and believe in her. "

Desiree' spoke loud enough for Dr. Franco to hear. " And what of the baby? "

" Do you think you're pregnant, Nancy? " She came around to my right wrist and stared at my birthmark.

" I don't know, but if I am, I definitely need help. "

She patted my hand and buzzed the intercom again. " I need a blood work-

up kit in here. " A different orderly came in and drew a vial of blood. " If your pregnancy is confirmed, do you know who the father is? "

" Marcus. "

" With your blackouts and memory loss, can you be absolutely sure? "

I thought of Bethanie's actions..did she make love to Adrian without my knowledge or consent? " Maybe Adrian. "

" If the results are positive, I hope both men will consent to a DNA test. " I shuddered, knowing full-well that implications and complications were sure to arise. Dr. Franco continued as more vials of blood were drawn. " In today's age, having unprotected sex can be a killer, so we'll check for diseases. " She turned to the orderly. " I want the lab results ASAP. " He left with the filled tubes and she sat back down. " Tell me about your family history, Nancy. "

Another obstacle I'd have to overcome. " Dr. Franco, I know next to nothing when it comes to that part of my life. " I explained about being found by a passing motorist on a deserted country road and then growing up in the orphanage.

" Let me talk to the authorities and maybe they'll have answers for me. " Tears seeped from my eyes. " Yes, this is an awful lot to absorb in one sitting, but I'll be with you every step of the way. You rest and later on today we'll start our real sessions. " She smiled, then injected a clear liquid into my IV drip and I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 27

Right before Nancy drifted away, I emerged for a few minutes, thankful that my acting skills had saved the day and the life of my unborn child. I was wide awake when a key clicked in the lock.

" How're you feeling, Nancy? "

I rolled my eyes, then corrected the good doctor. " In all actuality, she's my

understudy and isn't ready to take over a front position on center stage! " I paused for dramatic effect. " By the way, my name's Bethanie and I hope that anything Nancy said about me was taken with a grain of salt..she's jealous because I know who and what I am and she hasn't a clue about her own life! "

" How do you think that makes her feel, Bethanie? "

" I'm not the least bit concerned about her! " Nancy's life was over while mine was just beginning.

" In that case, tell me about your childhood, Bethanie. "

I felt at ease in Dr.Franco's presence and thought back to the good days when my mother had sung lullabies to Desiree' and me..

" Sailing on a ship called Dreams
Let your life be as it seems
Tho' wind and waves may swell on high
I shall keep you love, right by my side

My arms shall keep you safe and warm
My heart will shelter you from harm
You are my ocean's precious pearl
My one and only, sweetest baby girl. "

Tears sprang to my eyes. " One fine day my mother, my twin sister and I played outside near our favorite spot, in the shade of an old oak tree not far from the white-flowering apple orchard. The spring sun beamed bright and yellow, but the afternoon sky turned to clouds of black and grey when my father overshadowed us, standing with the family Bible in his outstretched hands. He opened it to a bookmarked page and my mother's face turned the same color as the low hanging clouds. Her tears flowed in torrents as my father screamed horrible insults at her, then he took me and my mother inside our house, and left Desiree' outside to confront the raging storm. I cried for my father to bring Desiree' in because I knew she'd be frightened by the thunder and lightning, but he told me that she was being punished for making Mama cry. From that moment on I hated her because she hurt Mama and that in turn hurt me. "

Dr. Franco wiped my eyes and smoothed my forehead. " How old were you when this incident occurred? "

" Desiree' and I were born in October of 1857, so we were about 5. In the weeks that followed the storm Mama begin to change..she spent hours locked in her room, just playing her piano. She didn't want to see me even though I said I loved her over and over again and that I'd be a good girl and do anything and everything she asked. She never said a word, but I could hear her crying. One day Papa took Mama away and she never came home. " I sighed deeply. " Desiree' couldn't please Papa, no matter how hard or in how many ways she tried. Without Mama's love to guide me I wrapped Papa around my little finger..Desiree' had material possessions galore, but I had all of Papa's love, while she was lucky to recieve crumbs of kindness here and there. Papa and I began going on many trips together, while Desiree' was left with her nannies. "

" Did your father ever explain what Desiree' did that was so awful? "

" Papa told me a secret..he said that because of Desiree's actions Mama had a nervous breakdown and needed to be under constant supervision at Melhana Sanitarium. "

" Your mother was at Melhana Sanitarium? "

" Yes, but she didn't even know who I was..when we were ten, Mama died of bonebreak fever. How was I supposed to forgive Desiree' for taking her away? " I shuddered as thoughts of revenge grew ever sweeter. " When I was sixteen, I found our Family Bible and realized the truth as I gazed at my mother's handwriting..Desiree' wasn't a Terrance, but a DuMond. I finally understood why Papa hated the sight of her so much..she was a constant reminder of my Uncle Joshua! He and Desiree' sailed to France and she lived with his family for two years. We had very little contact with her and didn't even know about her engagement or marriage to Count Marcus of Fredericksburg, until he came to Springfield. " I paused for a minute. The doctor nodded her head for me to go on, and I told her about my own engagement to him. " Why Papa gave his consent for Marcus to marry me is beyond my imagination..he was always the one who wanted nothing to do with Desiree' and I certainly didn't want or need her hand-me-down items of love. " I shook my head, then smiled in triumph. " I bested both of them by running away from my engagement party to marry the love of my life,

Phillipe Grenoble..in fact, last night would've been a replay of those events.
"

" So you were at the engagement party..and where was Nancy? "

" Sleeping her life away, which is actually for the best..I've been given a second chance at motherhood and I'm not going to waste it. "

" Do you think you're pregnant? " I told Dr. Franco about my own baby, and how Phillipe and I had missed out on raising him. " A baby needs two parents, Bethanie..would Phillipe be helping you with that? " I explained my strange circumstances as best I could..
" Bethanie, can I ask you some questions? "

" I guess so.." I yawned.

" I can see you have a great love for children. " I nodded in agreement.
" Would you ever make an innocent child feel unworthy and unloved, blaming it for circumstances you knew it had no control over..such as who his or her parents might be? " I shook my head no. " I'll talk with you later, Bethanie..until then, think about what I've said. " She put more medicine in the IV, and right before I drifted off, comprehension set in..she was speaking about my father's unwarranted hatred of Desiree'.

Someone quietly spoke my name. " Nancy, it's time to wake up..I have something important for you to watch. "

Dr. Franco switched on the tv set and punched a button on the remote control. My face came on the screen and I talked, but it wasn't quite my voice. Desiree' and I were rapt until the end, then she spoke up. " Before my mother left for good, I'd sneak in and visit with her..she always smiled and let me sit beside her and play the piano. One day my father found me in there and was harsh to my mother..' You're still attached to her, aren't you? You'll pay dearly for your sins. ' My father always told me that he, Bethanie and my mother went on wonderful around the world trips, then he'd laugh when I asked why I couldn't come along with them. " Desiree' began to cry in earnest. " It's no wonder Bethanie hated me..Papa planted rotten seeds of misery that made her think I was the cause for Mama's breakdown and

death. I would've hated me too. " I found it hard to breathe as Desiree's burdens weighed hard and heavy in my heart.

" Desiree'.." Dr. Franco touched our cheek and she whimpered, wailed and keened, then screamed in sheer terror. She swept me over the edge with her into a deep pit and I didn't know if we'd return or not.

Kermes Twa called my name from a great distance. " Nancy, if you allow yourself to sink into the depths of grief with Desiree', you'll both suffer needlessly..she knows you love her and that's enough for now. " The Great Goddess swirled red thoughts throughout my mind.

" Desiree' doesn't trust Dr. Franco, but she'll learn that Mark's mother is here to help her heal and won't betray her like Dr. Pierre Franco did. "

When I woke up, sparks of anger flew from my tongue. " Who's Dr. Pierre Franco and what did he do that hurt Desiree' so much? "

" Being aggitated won't help you or Desiree' acheive a blending of your personalities.."

" We've passed that point..now help her come back to me! " Dr. Franco adjusted my medication once again and I calmed down. " Dr. Pierre Franco was my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, and when I first read his notes and writings about vampires and witches they seemed farfetched and fanciful. " She looked in my eyes. " He was a contemporary of Desiree' and Marcus Canossa, and his stepsister Sheridan. "

She wouldn't go into specifics, but her explanation of what he did to Marcus and Desiree' with Sheridan's blessings sufficed and I understood why Desiree' felt as she did about trusting Dr. Franco with her life.

She reached into her pocket and withdrew a heart-shaped locket on a short gold chain, then opened it..one side held a baby's picture and the other side a young couple who I assumed were the baby's parents. " I found this on an abandoned baby girl many years ago and from what you've told me about your own circumstances, I think you might be her. " Dr. Franco showed me a curl of dark babyfine hair.." A DNA test can confirm or deny. "

" What if I am..how do I find my parents if no one could find them so many years ago? "

" We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, but there are many ways to access knowledge..newspapers, hospital records, police reports, eye witness accounts..even hypnosis. "

Desiree' had remained calm and well hidden until Dr. Franco mentioned the word hypnosis. " Don't let her destroy us! " She fled the scene again.

Dr. Franco smoothed my forehead. " Nancy, Desiree's fears have merit, but sometimes the most difficult path brings the answers we need to move us forward in life..even as babies, forgotten memories are stored away in our minds, but I promise to use the other alternatives first and see what information I can gather. " She took out a small pair of scissors. " May I? "

I nodded yes before anything else happened. " I want to see Valera. " I knew she'd accept me no matter what the outcome might be.

" Maybe tomorrow, but now it's time for you to rest. " She injected more medication into my IV and I drifted off.

I took a deep breath and slowly emerged from peaceful sleep. Dr. Franco was still in the room, watching my every movement as though I'd run away, given half the chance. I had no intentions of venturing out with Sher waiting to devour me. " Bethanie, I want you to watch this video. " I did and was surprised by Desiree's statements, and even more surprised when the good doctor called Desiree' by name. She held up a sheaf of yellowed papers. " These reports concern your mother and I think you'll both need each other to lean on after I read them to you. " Neither one of us knew what to expect and our souls tentively touched for the first time. " The first report written by the doctor of record states that Merydyth Terrance was admitted by her husband, Richard, on January 23rd, 1863 to Melhana Sanitarium. Her husband said their local doctor had been treating her for inconsolable delusions and feared she'd become a danger to both their young daughters. Mrs. Terrance's acute aggitation called for sustained sedation for the duration of her stay. Every once in a great while her husband and daughter, Bethanie came to visit, but the only person she wanted to see was her other daughter, Desiree'. As the years went by her body weakened and she finally succumbed to bonebreak fever and died in 1868. "

" Papa's pride killed Mama. " We both spoke at the same time and although the healing process had begun, we knew there were many obstacles to surmount before forgiveness and understanding gave us new perspectives on how to proceed in our tangled lives. We both sighed, then laughed in unison.

" Bethanie, one thing I know we have in common is our love of children..I always wanted my own, but Sher made sure that never happened. "

" Desiree', Phillip completed my life and my heart aches now that Sher's trying to do away with the baby inside of us. " Bethanie told me about Sher's plans. " I pulled the wool over her eyes, though. "

" You were always the best actress in the world, Bethanie. "

" Girls, you need to rest. " Dr. Franco adjusted the medicine drip once again and Bethanie and I slept, finally at peace with each other.

I had no concept of time, but blessed peace infused my mind. I'd been set free from my restraints, so I leisurely stretched, then stood up and walked a few steps to the soft coolness of the padded walls. I inhaled deeply, hoping to catch some of Desiree's rose scent, but instead my eyes were drawn to Dr. Franco's chair. Curiosity got the better of me and from the seat I picked up a manila folder addressed to whom it might concern. Inside were legal pages stating all the known pertinent facts about my being found early on the morning of April 16th, 1978 and being delivered to the orphanage where I spent most of my life. Underneath it was part of a last will and testament of Lousanne DuMond Adams. ' In the event of my untimely death, all my worldly possessions, including my family home in France goes to my only daughter, Nancy. And furthermore I assign sole guardianship to..' The rest of it was missing, so I positioned myself in front of the camera. " Dr. Franco, we need to talk. "

A key clicked, the door opened and I fell into Valera's arms, thankful to see her loving face. She hugged me tight and murmured comforting words that calmed my spirit and heart. I closed my eyes and wept great torrents of tears. " It'll be all right, Nancy..I won't desert you. "

" Neither will I. " There was no mistaking Marcus's voice. I clung to Valera, then shook my head and laughed at the absurdity of my situation. " Don't you have faith in me, Nancy? "

" It's more like I don't trust myself, Marcus. " I sighed as I melted into the solid strength of his comforting arms. He looked me straight in the eye and shadows of unease crossed his soul.

Dr. Franco entered the room, carrying a black briefcase. " Nancy, I do believe I've found some puzzle pieces to your past. Let me see your right wrist.." She turned it over and spoke again. " Your unusual birthmark reminded me of the abandoned baby I found and took to the orphanage and DNA tests confirm that you are one and the same. "

" That still doesn't tell me about my parents or.." Marcus put his finger to my lips.

" Dr. Franco thought I could circulate the locket pictures to my many business associates and contacts throughout America and Europe, but I was astonished when I recognized them myself. " He closed his eyes as he remembered. " It was almost 21 years ago I received a letter from your mother, Lousanne. She said she had papers from her great, great, great, great-grandmother and that we were distantly related through marriage. I was intrigued, so I called her and when she mentioned the name Annelle Aleanse, I told her that Annelle and Desiree' were cousins. Lousanne said that she and her baby daughter were flying to America and asked if it would be possible for them to visit Sheridan and me in Springfield. I didn't hesitate to tell her yes, and the date of April 15th, 1978 was set for their arrival and our meeting. When I told Sheridan about their visit, she was overjoyed and said they must stay with us at Casa Sheridan. They came as planned, but we only spent a short time together, talking about ancestors and families. On April 16th, Lousanne wanted to go into Springfield proper and rent a car. Sheridan and I drove her and the baby into town and dropped them off at the car rental business, and she assured us they'd be back in time for supper. They never showed up, and not a trace of them was ever found. I was heartbroken for days, especially since her baby had taken such a shine to me and I to her. " He kissed my forehead. " I hesitated to accept David Winslow's invitation to his Mid-Winter Charity Ball, but the fates intervined, and I found you once again.. "

He handed me the rest of the missing legal document. ' And furthermore, I assign sole guardianship to Count Marcus Canossa, to raise Nancy and love as his own. ' The next page had been signed, sealed and delivered to the Springfield Court on April 16th, 1978, and also bore the current date of February 10th, 1999. " Yes, Nancy, I spoke to my lawyer and the courts have given me sole legal guardianship while you remain in Melhana Sanitarium. "

I remained quiet as my mind whirled in careening emotions and that's when Bethanie paid me a visit, offering a million apologies about the animosity of her actions. I didn't know whether to believe her or not, but the Great Goddess intervened on her behalf. " Accept what she says with thanksgiving and joy in your heart, especially her next words. "

" Nancy, I'm sorry about a lot of things, but not about Adrian. " She confessed that they made love, and she hoped she'd made a baby with him. Her smile was grand, but then she sighed. " Now it comes down to choices, Nancy..you can make me go away or let me stay within your heart and soul with Desiree'. "

That's when Desiree' piped up. " Bethanie and I are well on our way to healing and what's done can't be undone, no matter what you say or do. "

" How do I tell Marcus about what happened? "

Kermes Twa said, " Marcus brought much of this on himself, thinking of Bethanie when he should have focused on you and Desiree'. As partial payment for that sin, I allowed Bethanie to sleep with Adrian, but she now understands that Adrian and Phillipe will never blend their souls..Phillipe's heart will always belong to Bethanie, and Adrian's love is only for you and Desiree'. " My mind absorbed her words like a thirsty sponge. " You'll find Bethanie's knowledge invaluable in the weeks to come. "

" I've given Dr. Franco my permission to hypnotize you, but only if you consent, Nancy. " Before Desiree' could interfere, I nodded my head yes.

Dr. Franco dangled the gold locket in front of me and I drifted off.." Go back to your first memories and tell us about them, Nancy. "

" My Mama had many troubles in getting pregnant, so when I came along in December of 1976, she was overjoyed and loved me more than life itself. Mama used to sing me lullabies and tell me fairytales as she rocked me to sleep. " Being her baby brought smiles to my face.

" Tell me what you remember about your trip to America. "

" Mama told me we were going to fly on angels' wings to a beautiful country and meet some distant cousins. A tall man with dark curly hair and crinkles around his eyes met us at the airport and his smile was love personified. " I hugged black trouser clad knees and heard sighs as someone smoothed my hair. I raised my arms and sat once again on those knees as I snuggled close to his beating heart.

" What happened next? "

" We got into a big black car and while Mama looked at the scenery, Marcus bounced me on his knees and his funny faces made me laugh and giggle. The car stopped and a woman held out her arms to me..she had an angelic face, but the tone of her voice terrified me and I cried and screamed until Mama took me away from her and calmed my fears. " Strong arms rocked me back and forth. " I slept with Mama that night and in the morning I got to sit on Marcus's lap as we rode in his car to town. Mama rented a car and we spent the day shopping and driving through the countryside. It was already dark when she drove the winding road to the castle. " I tensed up. " Mama's arms tightened around me and the next thing I remember is being thrown from the car. I tried to find Mama, but all I could see was a big ball of fire lighting up the night sky. I cried myself to sleep and when daylight came a nice lady found me and took me with her to a different place. I was so sad because I didn't have my Mama to love me any more. "

" Nancy, open your eyes. " Dr. Franco snapped her fingers.

" Marcus..I remember you and Sheridan. "

Desiree' spoke silently. " I'm sure Sheridan had something to do with your mother's disappearance, Nancy. "

Bethanie agreed with her. " Yes, but Marcus doesn't seem to think she can do anything wrong. "

A voice crackled on the intercom. " The items you requested are here Count Marcus. " The door opened and Gustav brought in the trunk from the foot of Marcus's bed, and an orderly lugged in the old steamer trunk that Valera, Desiree' and I had found at Ye Eald Bok Sceoppa.

" You're a sight for sore eyes, Gustav..I've missed you. "

I hugged him and he kissed my forehead. " Castle Desiree' isn't the same without your lovely presence, Countess Nancy. " He spoke quietly to Marcus, then left.

Valera removed a key from her pocket and unlocked the steamer trunk. Situated on top of everything was a leatherbound book inscribed with the initials ADA. Valera opened the book and all of us held our breath as she cleared her throat. " This diary belonged to Annelle DuMond Aleanse. "

Desiree' beamed with happiness. " Read what she says, Valera. "

" The first entry is dated Thursday, August 24th, 1873. ' This afternoon at Madame Chaumont's, Father introduced me my shy, beautiful cousin Desiree' Terrance. I knew next to nothing about her except that she had a twin sister named Bethanie, and their mother and mine were twins, also. I took it upon myself to hold her hand through lunch and immediately sensed she was very special. She asked if I wanted to tag along while she and my father's first mate took an afternoon walk, but I gave her a big hug and told her I wanted to visit with Father because I hadn't seen him in three years. I became very concerned when she began to cry and as I wiped the tears from her eyes she explained that she'd never felt this kind of love in her entire life. My heart went out to her and I knew I was right in my assumptions.

After Father and I caught up on news of family and friends, he said that he'd seen the perfect dress for Desiree' to wear when she met Mother. We strolled arm-in-arm along the avenue and he stopped in front of a fine lady's store. Through the window I could see a deep apricot traveling gown..the round collared neckline was accented with white lace trim and the high waistline dipped to a 'V' at the junction of the pleated belling skirt. The long sleeves were curved at the elbow and decorated with two horizontal rows of white lace at the wrist. Desiree' and I were close to the same size and I asked the dressmaker about the measurements..when I was sure it would fit her

perfectly, Father bought it on the spot, along with white gloves for her to wear.

Father had to attend to details about our next morning's departure and I freshened up while I waited for Desiree' to return. When she came through the door, she looked sad and lost and said she'd really be missing Phillippe. I wanted to cheer her up and told her we would become good friends and she'd never feel lonely again. I helped her out of her dress and undergarments, then washed her with soothing lavender soap and warm water. She slipped on her nightgown, then sat down in front of the mirror. I smiled at her reflection and asked if she wanted me to brush her hair. When she nodded yes, I removed her hairpins and watched it fall to her waist in dark silky curls.

Desiree' told me that having someone near her own age to confide in was an answer to her prayers as the brush motions calmed and relaxed her. We talked a bit longer, then climbed into bed and drifted off to sleep. ' "

Desiree' was perturbed because Valera had skipped a major portion of the story..she opened our mouth to spill the beans, but the Great Goddess said, " It's not your story to tell, Desiree'. Marcus must hear it from a reputable source. "

She smiled instead. " Annelle imprinted her heart into my soul..from the moment we met, she loved me unconditionally and I returned that love with no hesitation. "

" Desiree', I'm glad to see you have enough trust in me to join us. " Dr. Franco reached out and touched our hand.

Desiree' flinched and shrank away from the doctor's voice.

" Is there something wrong? " Marcus gazed into our eyes, but Desiree' faded from view. " Where did she go, Nancy? "

" Desiree' has many trust issues to deal with, Marcus. "

Valera put the book down and went to steamer trunk again. She held up the dress Annelle had written about..Desiree' grabbed it from her hands and Bethanie joined her as they swirled, twirled and laughed with glee. Happiness spread throughout my body, but it wasn't long before I grew tired

and flopped on the floor with my chin in my hands. My nerves were on edge and I began to cry, not understanding how joyful energy could turn into a sadness almost past the level of what I could endure. Bethanie laughed, " Don't be a frightened schoolgirl ninny..this is the same way I felt all through my pregnancy! "

The door opened and a lunch specialty of chicken cassoulet containing corn and peas in a thick rich white sauce was rolled in.

" This is what we had to eat at Madame Chaumont's. " Desiree' was estatic.

Valera handed me a glass of bright red liquid which I drank..I felt Adrian's blood circulate within my system and waited to see Bethanie's response. She spoke volumes of truth. " I see that Desiree' isn't the only one dealing with issues of trust. "

Marcus touched me and I almost jumped out of my skin. " Don't shut me out of your thoughts and emotions..let me help you deal with them. "

He didn't mention names. " Who are you talking to, Marcus? Me or Desiree', or perhaps, Bethanie..or all three of us? " He was perplexed by my answer and shook his head. " Each of us needs answers that only the other ones can supply and whether or not you agree, we're here on a permanent basis to learn from each other. I've talked to Desiree' and Bethanie and they've agreed to answer your questions as honestly as they can or clear up any issues as Valera continues to read from Annelle's diary. " Marcus resigned himself to my decision.

" The next entry is dated Friday, August 25th. ' Desiree' was surprised, but pleased by the dress Father had bought and asked me about my mother as I helped her put it on. I said she'd love her as much as Father and I did. Just after sunrise we left for Nancy, as traveling Paris streets was dangerous during hours of darkness.

Desiree' wanted me to tell her about the city of Nancy and I complied. When I was through she asked a favor as she held my hand in hers..her exact words were, " Would you consent to becoming my blood sister? "

Bethanie drew in a sharp breath, then spoke with remorse. " I never realized my actions had this kind of effect on you, Desiree'. "

Marcus was dumbfounded as Valera continued. " ' I told her I'd be more than honored to have her as my sister, but didn't know how we'd accomplish that feat. Desiree' explained that we'd make a slight cut on our wrists, then rub them together and mingle our life forces. She removed a silver handled letter opener from her pocket, then did a double-take when she looked at the heart-shaped birthmark on my right wrist. I told her not to be alarmed because that mark had been carried down through many generations on my father's side of the family and was considered a fated sign of good fortune and the best of luck. She said we'd both been blessed as she showed me a pigmented mirror image on her own right wrist. After we co-mingled our blood, we swore in all holiness that we'd remain true-blooded sisters in this life and beyond. We sealed our oath with the kiss of sisterhood to complete the ceremony and became sisters in heart, soul, and blood, sharing what we thought and felt, without worrying about betrayal. Desiree' said truth and honesty between sisters showed the highest form of love. ' "

I turned my own right wrist over for everyone to see..it bore the same heart-shaped birthmark, complete with the scar I'd received from Marcus.

" Each of us is linked together in ways that have yet to be revealed. " I climbed back into his lap and snuggled close, drinking in the human touch I'd missed throughout my entire life.

" Yes, Nancy, that's exactly what I did with Annelle afterwards..she made me feel safe and loved. " Desiree' smiled and sighed.

Valera read some more. " ' Desiree' laid her head on my lap and slept until the horses stopped in front of the Meurthe Inn. She and Father got out of the carriage in order to meet Mother, while I continued on to our country home. I had much unpacking to do and wanted to make sure that Desiree's room looked perfect. By the time their carriage arrived, servants had lit the driveway with bright lanterns and the windows sparkled with candle light.

Mother came up to my room and we spent a pleasant half hour alone, while Desiree' and my father talked in his study. We walked downstairs when the piano came to life and Mother and I clapped our hands as we caught the tail-end of the melody and conversation. Father smiled in our direction.

" Now I have the three loveliest ladies in all of France to bring music and laughter to home and hearth. " Mother added classical music to Desiree's studies and when Father hugged Mother and Desiree' hugged me, I knew we'd become a true family. I couldn't wait to show Desiree' her surprise and

we bounded upstairs to the third door on the left. " Close your eyes, then tell me what you think. "

Father, Mother and I stood in the doorway and smiled at the pleasure written on Desiree's face when she saw an exact replica of her room in Springfield. She hugged and kissed us all, then thanked us profusely.

Father handed her a small white box tied with a red satin ribbon. She opened it..hanging from a pure gold bracelet was a jetblack amulet shaped like a flat teardrop. It had belonged to Desiree's mother and he was sure she wanted Desiree' to have it. She fastened it around her wrist and I was glad she didn't ask how my father had come into possession of it.

At Madame Chaumont's he'd given me a letter addressed from Desiree's mother to him. Inside the envelope was the bracelet and an explanation of why Desiree' was in desperate need of our constant love and nurturing. ' "

Valera slipped an envelope from the diary's pages and held it out..Desiree' and Bethanie both reached for it at the same time and I couldn't help but laugh. Everyone looked my direction. " Just a bit of sisterly competition. "

" I'm older than you, Bethanie, so I'll read the first paragraph and you can read the second one. " Marcus rolled his eyes and guffawed.

" The letter's dated October 24th, 1857, one week after our birth, Bethanie. ' My Dearest Joshua, it is with deep happiness and regret that I must send this letter to you..when I found out I was pregnant, I prayed with all my heart and soul that the baby would belong to my husband and would not bear the mark of your family, but doesn't the saying go, 'Be sure your sins will find you out?'

I think back to the first day we met and the three weeks we spent together. Those were some of the most beautiful moments in my life and when you presented me with this bracelet as a token of your love, my feelings for you were higher than the Swiss Alps and deeper than the Pacific Ocean. All our hopes were shattered when I came home and found out my parents had already arranged legally binding marriages..mine to Richard and Madeliane to you. My love for you never waned and when I saw you nine months ago, I couldn't help myself, never giving a second thought to what fate held in store for us when we succumbed to the love we both still felt. ' "

Bethanie read the second portion. " ' Richard and I were blessed with twin daughters on October 17th..Desiree' was born first and Bethanie came second. They were more than beautiful and I loved them with all my heart. This first week of motherhood has passed with pleasant memories and the fulfillment of my hopes and dreams, but dreams can break when you least expect them to. There is no doubt in my mind that Bethanie is Richard's child, but Desiree's right wrist is showing signs of the DuMond marking, standing out against her delicate skin as if telling the entire world how much I loved you. I'll not write to you again, and I expect no reply. When Desiree' comes of age, I'll tell her the truth and pray that God in heaven will forgive us our sins of loving each other too much. ' It's signed by our Mother, Merydyth Terrance. "

" Mama carried that burden in her heart for such a long time. " Bethanie and Desiree' spoke in unison, their souls growing stronger as they bonded.

Valera read more from Anelle's diary. " ' Father told me the rest of Desiree's circumstances and I came to understand why she'd been rejected by my Uncle Richard, but why he'd hurt his innocent children by pitting one against another goes beyond my scope of reasoning. ' "

" Truth is the key to love and understanding in all situations, but as days go by, it's sometimes easier to lie and hope for the best. " Dr. Franco looked straight at me.

I prayed to Kermes Twa that Marcus would understand if the circumstances were the same for us. The Great Goddess knew I had choices to make, but not until test results came back that would confirm or deny my pregnancy..choices of destroying, or keeping, loving and understanding no matter what hardships I might face.

" Marcus, there're so many things I need to say, but I don't have all the facts. "

" Nancy, none of you know the whole story yet..once everything's revealed and options weighed, that's when choices can be made by everyone involved. " Dr. Franco came to my rescue with truth of her own and I kissed her cheek.

" Do you trust her implicitly, Nancy? " Desiree' still had misgivings about the good doctor.

" Kermes Twa told me Dr. Franco is the key to unlocking our past, present, and future. " Desiree' mulled that thought over in her mind.

Chapter 28

Silence was kept as Valera continued reading.. " ' Father and Mother went to their rooms and I went to mine for a short while, then returned to check on Desiree'. She opened the door, then patted the bed. I sat beside her and she traced her index finger on my wrist as I told her how often I'd wished for a sister such as she, but there'd been no other children for my parents. She wiped away the tears that fell from my eyes and said, " Sometimes having a sister is the worst thing that can happen, but having a sister like you to love and trust can make all the difference in the world. Bethanie and I were never close, and after my mother died I didn't exist for her or my father, so I understand your feelings of loneliness. That's when I told Desiree' I'd never hurt her. ' "

" Annelle was the one person who kept her promise to me. " Desiree' sighed.

" Desiree', I'm sorry that I hurt you for so many years. " Bethanie's remorse coursed through my veins.

" You're forgiven, but it wasn't your fault. " My eyes filled with a triple dose of tears that streamed down my face.

Dr. Franco said, " It's never too late for forgiveness and the healing which comes with it. "

Valera turned the page. " ' Desiree' changed the subject and asked if I had a boyfriend. I told her about my engagement to Reven Aleanse and that Mother and I were to sail to New York to meet his family and buy my wedding trousseau in September of 1874. My sister was quite the inquisitive one and asked how a person knows about true love and marriage. My exact words were, " You know when your very heart says it's the truth, and you feel the comfort and companionship of your soul touching his. True love will find you when you least expect it, Desiree'. " ' "

" Annelle was very wise, just like you, Valera. " I hugged her as Desiree' and Bethanie made a pact to never let anything or anyone come between them again.

" ' I knew that Desiree's heart needed plenty of time to heal when she told me she didn't want her circumstances to ever change again. I explained that our bonds of sisterhood would last all our lives as I helped her undress and get ready for bed. I brushed her raven tresses and was reminded of the loving care I'd received all my life..in that one moment I became her surrogate mother, telling her that I'd be her remedy and cure for as long as she lived under our roof. I stayed with Desiree' until she slept peacefully, then went to my own room. ' "

Marcus wrapped his arms around me and whispered the same words that Annelle had said to Desiree'. I cried and hoped our love would be strong enough to survive intact as the days wore on.

" The next entry is dated Saturday, August 26th.

' Desiree' was already awake and sitting by the windowseat when I came to her room. I picked out a simple dress for her to wear and we went down to breakfast.

Mother and Father were just finishing coffee, and we were offered the opportunity to go into the city with them later in the afternoon. We ate the chef's specialty of Quiche Lorraine in record speed, then strolled to the very center of the knot garden where the main focus was the three-tiered fountain. The sprinkles splashed us and we removed our shoes, rolled off our stockings, then stuck our feet in the water. " Desiree', this is the heartbeat of the knot garden..the story goes that for many years the roses and lilies were kept far apart from each other and this fountain was filled by their tears of sadness. One day the Great Gardener, Himself, intertwined these particular flowers and their blending signified His eternal care in vibrant cascades of joy and love. " I guided her hands into the dripping liquid. " Splash some water on your face and true love will come to you today..or so the legend goes. " I giggled as she dabbed just a bit on her forehead. " That won't do the trick, Sister. " I cupped my hands and the water soaked her hair and dress and we commenced to having a water war!

We finally called a truce, then sat in the sun to dry off, comfortable in our silence. The time came to leave and as we crossed the lawn

we saw a young man deep in conversation with Father..they both stared at us, but we didn't stop for an introduction. When we entered Desiree's room, I told her the legend had worked because the young man was smitten with her. ' "

Marcus looked intently at me. " That was true then and now, Desiree'. I'm smitten with the person you've evolved into. "

Valera smiled and continued. " ' Desiree' and I both laughed when she said, " You mean he wants to be friends with a girl who looks like a guttersnipe..he probably thinks we're the serving girls, finishing the morning's wash. "

Desiree' laughed outloud at our unkept appearance. " Still smitten with guttersnipes, are you? " She held out her arms and surprised him with her kiss.

" Desiree', I was fastly falling in love with you even before your Uncle told me you were his niece. " He looked past her into my eyes. " It was just as easy with you, Nancy, because seeing yourself through my eyes brought out your special qualities. "

Valera reached back into Annelle's trunk and removed a dress as green as pine trees, stiched with pale ivy leaves and red roses on the white cotton collar. I treasured the look on his face as Desiree' said, " I remember thinking this was what Marcus should've seen me wearing and later on that same day he did. "

" ' We left the house and on the way to Nancy, Father talked of the town's rich history. The driver let us out near Neptune's lead fountain on Stanislas Square and I pointed out the city hall's ornamented facade with the Duke's and town's coat of arms. The Grand Hotel was on the other side and as we walked by, the same young man who'd been with Father earlier in the day almost knocked us down in his haste to hail his carriage. He begged our pardon, but since Desiree' and I hadn't been properly introduced, we ran right on past him, laughing and giggling. ' "

" I'd brought some of my wines for your Uncle and Aunt to taste and was late to the meeting. I yelled after you, but you'd already rounded the corner and were out of sight. " Marcus sighed. " I don't want to lose you again, Desiree'. " We closed our eyes to his remark, knowing there were no easy

answers. " Never look away from the man who loves you, Nancy..I swear we'll make it through all our trials and tribulations. "

" ' We passed the afternoon with sightseeing and soon the carriage pulled up beside us and we went home.

Days flew by until Monday morning, September 16th, 1875 finally arrived. Mother and I were packed and ready to set sail for America in order to meet Reven's family and shop for my wedding trousseau. Even though I was happy, my heart was breaking, because I felt guilty about leaving Desiree' behind. " When we return in April, I want you to help me plan my wedding and be my maid of honor. After I'm married, we'll introduce you to French society by throwing many fine parties in your honor, ultimately finding you a suitable husband who'll appreciate your sweet nature. "

Desiree' clinched her hands and gritted her teeth, realizing the whole story of what had occurred inside the bowels of the Nancy Cathedral wasn't going to be revealed. Valera closed the book with a loud clap and Dr. Franco said, " Count Marcus, this is a good time for a break..give Nancy a couple of hours to rest and then come back. "

Marcus wasn't thrilled with that idea, but tucked me into bed, then kissed me on the lips. " Nancy, Desiree', I love you both. " I saw tears in his eyes as he left my side.

Desiree' began to scream and wail as Valera held us tightly against her breast. " I know how hard this is on you and I promise Marcus will hear the whole story, but he's not ready to accept his hellish part in what happened yet. " Dr. Franco injected some medication into the IV drip and we slept.

Tuesday Afternoon

I woke a few hours later with Valera sitting by my side, holding my hand. I drank the liquid nourishment she offered and tasted Adrian's blood. " I know you're wondering where he is and how he's doing. "

The door opened and Adrian walked in, then kissed both my cheeks. He was followed by Dr. Franco who called on Bethanie. " Go ahead and explain what you did, Bethanie..honesty is the first step to healing in all matters. "

She barely skimmed the surface before Adrian interrupted. " Bethanie, I understand your motives and intentions because I know all too well what the need for love can make you do. Of course, my deep-seated feelings are for Nancy and Desiree', but I'd like to get to know you better. "

I wondered what his reaction would be once Bethanie confronted him with the more intimate details of what she and Phillippe had done without our consent or knowledge. He surprised me with his next sentence. " Saturday night I had a most realistic dream about us, Nancy..one where we made love over and over again. "

I rolled my eyes and let Bethanie do the talking. When she was through, she asked for his understanding and forgiveness and I was sure Adrian would walk away and never want to see me again. " Nancy, integrating love from ages and people past only adds layers of deeper and truer feelings. " He smiled, then slipped the silver ring with the tear shaped Herkimer Diamond into my palm. " Maybe one day you'll consent to wear this ring for me. "

" I don't want to hurt you, Adrian.. " He put his finger to my lips.

" Now isn't the time for you to say yes or no to anything or anyone. " He kissed my mouth. " Truth will show you the way. "

" Don't you dare give him a reason to think you're in love with him, Nancy..I forbid it! " Marcus scowled as he shoved Adrian aside.

Dr. Franco stepped between them. " Stop this nonsense, right now! " They both settled down as she handed me papers that confirmed my pregnancy. Desiree' and Bethanie smiled and laughed, then left me in charge to explain the facts to Marcus and Adrian.

" Marcus, there's no need for you to be so rude..Adrian has every right to be here. " Valera held my hand and gave me the confidence to speak honestly. Tears formed in my eyes and my lips trembled. " I'm pregnant, Marcus, but both you and Adrian have to take DNA tests. "

I saw the flicker of raging anger in his eyes, but Bethanie came to my rescue. " Marcus, what happened wasn't Nancy's fault. " She explained what she'd

done to and with Adrian and Marcus realized he'd brought it upon himself.

Marcus kissed me long and deep, then whispered, " No matter what the tests say, I'll marry you and be the father to your baby. "

" I love you, Marcus. " He laid his hand ever so gently on my belly and the glow from Desiree' spread throughout my soul.

" I know what you feel and want, Nancy..you'd marry Marcus on the spot if he asked right now, but we'd best bide our time until he knows the whole truth. Self-hatred can destroy the heart and soul and he'll need time to heal, just as I have. " Desiree' showed her true colors of wisdom.

Dr. Franco said, " As long as both men are here, I can draw blood and determine who the baby's father is. " Marcus and Adrian rolled up their sleeves and she took samples, then sent them off to the lab. " Sit down, gentlemen. "

Marcus sat on one side of my bed and Adrian on the other. Valera opened Annelle's diary once again and continued from where she'd left off. " ' The next entry is dated Friday, Jan. 30th, 1877. ' This past week has been more than eventful..being 5 months pregnant with my first baby has tired me out as I've traveled by train from San Francisco to Springfield in order to attend my cousin Bethanie's bridal shower, engagement party and wedding to Count Marcus Canossa. The situation is strange because he'd been married to her twin sister, Desiree', whose untimely death left me with a broken heart. While I'm in Springfield, I'll be able to visit her gravesite and tell her how much I miss her.

Saturday, January 31st, 1877. Although the bridal shower went off without a hitch, Bethanie and Sheridan had their minds elsewhere..almost as if they'd made other plans that had nothing to do with the wedding. Today I'll relax because tonight I'll be up late at the engagement party.

Sunday, February 1st, 1877. I felt slightly excluded from the festivities, but didn't mind as all my thoughts were focused on Desiree'. How I wished she were still alive so we could talk and laugh like sisters once again. After the food was served, I noticed that Bethanie wasn't feeling well, and she, Marcus and Regina went upstairs..I certainly couldn't afford to be sick at this stage of my pregnancy and offered my excuses to Uncle Richard. He had my

carriage brought around and I returned to the Bethanie Inn. Providence was with me as the moment I went through the doors, a sudden thunderstorm began pelting fat raindrops on the roof. Flashes of lightning and big thundering booms didn't allow me to sleep very well.

Tuesday, February 3rd, 1877. The terrible storm of Saturday night was an omen of sorts as Marcus came to my room early Sunday morning, asking if I'd seen Bethanie. He told me he'd gone to her room to check on her around midnight, but she was missing. My heart ached for his unbearable loss and I wondered how he'd go on if she wasn't found. Our prayers were answered when the local livery owner found her today.

Wednesday, February 11th, 1877. It's been eight days since Bethanie was found wandering around the bottom of Coltsfoot Canyon..Uncle Richard sent word that after remaining in a deep sleep she finally woke up this morning and I gave thanks to God for sparing her life.

Thursday, February 12th, 1877. Marcus surprised me this morning when he asked if I'd be Bethanie's matron of honor in place of Sheridan as she's left Springfield to prepare Castle Desiree' for their homecoming. I was more than pleased to say yes and gave my consent. Tomorrow morning I'll visit Bethanie and give her some female company before the wedding takes place.

Monday, March 9th, 1877. Reven and Father sailed for China this morning, leaving Mother and me to ourselves..the house is lonely and empty because Desiree' and Marcus left yesterday morning without even a word of good-bye. I'll give them a few weeks to get settled in Fredericksburg, then send a letter to Desiree'. ' "

" Doesn't she say anything about what happened between those two dates? " Desiree' was perturbed.

" Of course, Desiree', I was just getting to that part. " Valera rolled her eyes. " ' So many things have happened since Friday, February 13th, 1877 that I only jotted down highlights of events and conversations and am just now able to write them in a cohesive manner.

Friday, February 13th, 1877. At mid-morning I left my rooms at the Bethanie Inn and when I arrived at Uncle Richard's house, Regina met me.

She hugged me, then offered me breakfast and said she'd let Bethanie know I'd arrived. I had a seat at the kitchen table and heard footsteps on the stairway, and then a familiar voice saying " Hello..." I turned around and she held up her right hand in greeting, revealing the heart-shaped birthmark on her wrist and without a doubt, I knew she wasn't Bethanie, but Desiree'.

I slowly rose and asked how she was feeling, using Bethanie's name, then gave her a big hug and she relaxed. " I can't quite put my finger on it, but you've changed since your bridal shower. Somehow you seem less tense, more in control of your emotions.."

I smiled, then leaned over and spoke quietly. " More like the way I remember you, Sister Desiree' . "

Her eyes widened in shock. " Are your words to me supposed to bear meaning? "

I grabbed her hand and kissed her wrist. " The bonded connection to my blood sister that can never be broken! " I tucked my arm through hers and we strolled leisurely towards Uncle Richard's apple orchard in the warmth of the February daylight. When we stopped, Desiree' faced me directly and asked why I was the only one who suspected she was still alive.

" The windows to your soul are grounded in genuine love for Marcus, Desiree', whereas Bethanie's eyes were always looking somewhere else for someone else. The letters you wrote to me about your marriage to Marcus is the same way I feel about Reven. " Desiree' spread her hands across my belly and told me I'd be a wonderful mother, then asked how Reven felt about being a father.

I told her that Reven was already proclaiming how proud a papa he was and that we'd be sailing back to France on the Goddess Of The Sea with them as Reven had two weeks off before he returned to his own ship and finished his duties as first mate. We'd agreed that I'd stay with Mother and Father for the birth of our child. Desiree' was thrilled with that knowledge, then I asked why she'd let everyone assume she was dead? ' "

Desiree' turned to Marcus and answered the question. " I told my story to Annelle, but didn't think you'd accept or believe it. "

She was going to ask his forgiveness, but he spoke first. " You were right in your estimation of me, Desiree'..I wouldn't have believed a word you said,

and I fear your father would've persuaded me to put you away, like he did with your mother. " They sighed and held each other tight.

Valera went back to reading. " ' I reminded Desiree' that she was the one who said truth and honesty between blood sisters showed the highest form of love. We sat on a red-marbled bench and I listened intently to her story, then held her hands and told her I believed, especially in the wisdom of the Great Goddess. The afternoon hours quickly passed and we arrived at the house just as twilight descended. She was surprised, but pleased that Marcus had chosen me to be her Matron of Honor and asked me to spend the night with her.

Valera and Regina brought supper to Bethanie's room and as we ate, I told them about my wedding, and the fact that my baby was a miracle because so many doctors said it would be impossible for me to conceive.

After supper, I was allowed to stay with Desiree' and listen as she and Valera had a private conversation. Valera asked me to keep an eye on Desiree' when we sailed to Fredericksburg as she had other obligations to attend to.

By the time we finished eating and sponge bathing the hour was late. We climbed into Bethanie's goosedown bed, giggling and gossiping like old times, until our eyes grew heavy with sleep.

Saturday, February 14th, 1877. I was up and about before Desiree', and when I saw the violet-green swallow at her window, I knew it symbolized good omens for her future.

After breakfast we put our dresses on..mine was heavyweight lavender silk with an overlay of pale ivory Italian lace. The neckline was gently scooped and accented with cream colored velvet, as was the empire waist. The sleeves were form fitted and deep gold and green floral appliques were sewn around the flaring hemline. All in all it was a perfect accompaniment to my coloring and a compliment to Desiree's wedding gown. ' "

Valera stopped there and went to Annelle's trunk..she removed those same dresses and Desiree' cried in earnest as she spoke of how she'd felt by pretending to be Bethanie. " I was disturbed by the fact that I was swiftly becoming as good an actress as my sister..keeping up with false pretenses

made my heart weep, but I wasn't allowed to physically shed the tears. When Regina fit the contours of my body into Bethanie's wedding gown, my mind screamed for the truth to come out, letting the chips fall where they may, but by not doing so I doomed myself. " Valera and Marcus held her until she calmed down. " All I ever wanted was to be with you, Marcus, at any and all costs. "

" We're more alike than I ever thought possible, Sister..being with Phillippe was all I ever wanted and everyone else was damned in my heart and soul. " Bethanie held the dress in front of us. " This dress was never meant to be worn by me, was it, Marcus? "

" Bethanie, I wanted to mold you into being Desiree'..apparently you sensed this and began to resent my mis-placed affections. What I did was more than wrong and I'm asking you to forgive me. "

" Only if you forgive me in return. " Bethanie and Marcus finally came to an understanding and a great burden was lifted from my shoulders.

" ' Uncle Richard came to the room and hugged me, then told me I was a beautiful matron of honor as he handed me a lavender and baby's breath bouquet to carry. ' "

Desiree' smiled. " Annelle was a vision of loveliness. " Valera went to the trunk again and withdrew a lace headdress with an attached floorlength train.

Bethanie exclaimed, " That's Mama's veil! "

" Papa never would've offered it to me as Desiree'. "

Bethanie saw the bouquet of dried baby's breath and lavender, interspersed with white gold-tinged prize roses that Valera presented to Desiree'. " It's not what I would've chosen for myself, but it suits you to a 'T', Sister. "

" They were going to be a special surprise for you on our first anniversary, Desiree'. " Marcus sighed. " Yet another symbol of my love for you transferred to Bethanie. "

" ' The wedding party was small as Desiree' was still recovering from her accident. Marcus's outfit complimented Desiree's wedding gown to

perfection..the cloth-covered buttons on his black waistcoat were embroidered with small flowers that matched the lavender and green floral appliques sewn on the bottom hem of her wedding gown.

The ceremony was simple, reminding me of my own wedding to Reven..ultimately, the Law of God is love in all relationships. ' "

Valera reached into the trunk and removed a small jewelry box which she handed to Marcus. He opened it and tears came to Bethanie's eyes. " Papa promised this ring to me.." She took it out of the box and put it on her finger.

Desiree' said, " Yes, I was more than stunned when Marcus slipped the wedding ring on my 3rd finger, but every word I said to you on that day is still true, Marcus. "

His kiss was filled with passioned longing and before I could stop him, he uttered the dreaded words I wanted to hear. " Please marry me, right here and now, Nancy. "

My heart broke as I refused. " Marcus, too many questions and issues remain unanswered and unresolved for all of us. A marriage that isn't based on truth and love and freedom from any and all constraints is doomed to fail..just know in your heart of hearts that I love you more than my own life. "

" ' I sat and watched Desiree' and Marcus waltz to *Valse Romantique* by Claude Debussy and hoped things would work themselves out eventually with the truth.

The delicious wedding supper provided Marcus with all his favorite foods, but he topped off the meal with an unusual surprise. ' " Desiree' took over and relayed the story of Bethanie Blush.

" ' Toasts were made and the time came for good-byes to everyone. Uncle Richard brought me my cloak and gloves as the weather was cold outside. Inside the enclosed carriage I yawned and found it difficult to keep my eyes open..Desiree' moved from Marcus's side to where I sat and I laid my head on her lap and slept.

It seemed mere minutes had passed before someone shook my shoulder and

I woke up to my husband's presence. I threw my arms around Reven's neck and giggled like a schoolgirl, then I kissed him full on his mouth. Introductions were made and needless to say, my night wasn't lonely.

Tuesday morning, March 17th, 1877. This past week Mother and I've been busy, getting the baby's room in order, but I've only just realized that next week is Marcus's birthday..as a man who has everything he needs or wants, I'll send him a book on ancient winemaking. I'd love to deliver it myself so I could see Desiree', but the doctor said it'd be dangerous to travel in the mountains.

Sunday, February 15th, 1877. Reven and I spent an intimate night renewing our vows of love and slept like babies in each other's arms. At breakfast Desiree' put on a good front, but I sensed her unhappiness at having to lie to Marcus..if only I could've told her the truth of our being half-sisters, maybe things would've been different.

Our staterooms onboard the clippership adjoined and I busied myself with stowing Desiree's things behind my own. I was surprised when she tapped at my door, pale as a ghost. I knew what she needed and gave her nutritious blood, mixed with wine, and asked her about the wooden box she'd put on the settee. She showed me her personal diary and I was scared for her. " Marcus thinks that the sun rises and sets with Bethanie, and she wouldn't dare keep anything besmirching her perfection. He'd begin asking questions that would be hard for you to answer as your sister. "

I put it in my trunk just before Marcus and Reven walked through the door. Reven told us we'd be eating supper with the ship's captain and who should it be but my own dear Papa! A most wonderful surprise for me, but Desiree' seemed distressed when I introduced her as Bethanie, and she kept to herself. ' "

Valera brought forth Desiree's diary. It was passed around and essentially told what Desiree' had felt like as a child growing up alone. When Bethanie read it she finally understood what her twin had gone through. " Papa always said you hated me and Mama and being left alone suited you just fine..I never questioned him, but believed what he said, Desiree'. "

" We were both separated by Papa's revenge against Mama. " Desiree' slightly moved her wrist and their Mother's face came into view on the amulet, smiling benignly from heaven because the truth had set her daughters free.

" ' Desiree' and I strolled the decks and acted like sisters for the rest of the voyage and I was able to spend much time with Papa and Reven.

We docked in Dunkirk on a gloomy March 1st and made our way to Madame Chaumont's Boardinghouse on the outskirts of Paris..it was good to see her smiling face again, but introducing Desiree' as Bethanie was an impossible situation as all the lies and falsehoods took their toll, not just physically, but emotionally. I hoped everything would be all right until we made it to Nancy and Desiree' would have time to rest and recuperate. After supper was finished, Reven had a surprise waiting in our room. A deep purple two piece gown with thin silk stripings of white plum that reminded me of wild violets. He informed me that he and Marcus were going to take Desiree' and me to a stage production of ' Farrah Rose ' at the University Playhouse.

After a marvelous meal, I went to Desiree's room while Marcus, Reven, and Papa retired to the smoking salon for fine Cuban cigars and cognac. ' "

Valera went to Annelle's trunk and brought forth a brightly burnished copper beaded gown..Desiree' and Marcus drew in their breaths. " That's the gown I bought for you. " He closed his eyes, then described the rest of the ensemble he'd purchased. " A full length hooded black velvet opera coat trimmed with redfox fur that matched the copper colored beadings on the gown and a pair of black satin shoes trimmed with copper rosette beading. "

" ' Desiree' followed me to my room so I could dress. I adorned the neck closure with a lilac/cream oval shaped quartz cameo of my own profile that Reven had given to me on our wedding day and I told her that I wore it when Reven was home, but he always carried it with him on his travels. ' "

Marcus reached into his pocket and brought forth a matching pair of pale-green and purple swirled cabochon cut glass hairpins. " I've kept these as a remembrance of you and our first kiss, Desiree'. "

Desiree's smile lit up the room. " The color matches our eyes, Nancy. " Our

kiss was charged with the electricity of certain love that lasts for eternity and beyond.

" ' Throughout the play, Desiree' seemed more like herself, enjoying every minute with Marcus. By the time we returned to our rooms, I was exhausted and went to sleep in Reven's arms.

The trip to Nancy was uneventful, and I said a prayer of thanksgiving when my childhood home came into view..I couldn't wait to see Mama, but I knew it would be rough on Desiree', as she had to pretend she knew nothing about my parents or her room or the ground settings.

After lunch, the men retired to talk business, and Mama realized how tired I still was and escorted me to my old room for a much needed nap. I should've stayed awake and kept better watch over my sister..when I heard the piano being played, I knew something was amiss because Desiree' said Bethanie wouldn't go near a piano. I opened my door and saw Marcus carrying Desiree' to their rooms.

Denial of her true self caused Desiree' to have a nervous breakdown of enormous proportions. ' "

Chapter 29

Wednesday Morning

" Lies and deceptions..what a toll they took on all our lives. "

Desiree's tears escaped from our eyes as Valera continued reading from Annelle's diary. " ' Marcus spent every waking minute with Desiree', calling out for Bethanie to return to him. Many days passed with no signs of recovery and the local priest was called in to give Desiree' last rites..that's when I decided to tell Marcus the entire truth, but never got the chance. There was no hint of recognition for her relatives, friends or surroundings as she rolled her eyes, shook her head, and let out a huge sigh.

" I have no intentions of dying, so everyone, please go home, but if you happen to pass my Uncle Joshua on the way out, kindly send him up to me. "

Marcus held her hand and openly wept over her. " My dearest Bethanie, we thought the worst had happened when you wouldn't wake up. "

" Rest assured I feel perfectly fine, although I do wish you'd quit rubbing it in by calling me Bethanie! I'm her twin sister, Desiree', the one who's persona non grata here. " There were murmurings of discontent as Desiree' revealed the truth! Marcus still believed she was Bethanie and explained that Desiree' had died 18 months before and was buried in America. Desiree' patted his hand and bit her lower lip. " If she's in the United States, then where are we at this moment? "

" At your Uncle Joshua's estate outside of Nancy, France. " Marcus frowned and asked if she remembered their Valentine's Day wedding.

Desiree' gasped outloud in a fit of giggles. " Surely you jest! Even though I'm much more mature than my 16 years would lead you to believe, I'm far too young for your consideration and for your further information, my father wouldn't give a marriage consent for either of his daughters to a man he's never met. " She grimaced. " According to my father, I'm like Eve in the Bible story of creation and all men are apples of worming temptation..forbidden fruit that I should have no dealings with. My Uncle Joshua's the only man who's not off limits to me, so there's no way on God's green earth I could or would be married to you! Enough of this farce..all of you please leave my room so I can prepare to sail for France and finish school! " My heart ached for both Desiree' and Marcus.

I hesitated to leave her in that condition and was taken by surprise when she swiftly grabbed my arm and asked me my name. She was overjoyed when I told her and laid her hands on my pregnant belly, then pressed her lips to my waist and hugged me tight. " I hope to have many babies when I get married someday. "

I knew that Marcus was right to call Dr. Pierre Franco in to review her case on the given advice of Father Quimper and I shed my own tears as he applied a foul-smelling cloth to Desiree's nose and lips. She inhaled deeply and drifted off to sleep. " Although her memories are vague, the worst of the danger has passed and she'll wake within the next four hours or so. " Dr. Franco left to consult his notes and each of us went to our rooms to eat and rest, but I paced back and forth, worried about Desiree's circumstances.

When I could wait no longer, I entered Desiree's room, and found Marcus already by her side. As the other family members gathered round, she opened her eyes and like a frightened animal slipped past all of them and ran into my waiting arms. " My father will be most displeased if we're late to board Goddess of the Sea! " She was frantic.

I held her tight and stroked her back, while tears streamed down my face.. " Cousin, it's wonderful that you're awake, but your memories aren't relevant to this present day and time. " I touched her cheek in a motherly way. " Your confusion comes from your illness..we're in the Lorraine Region of France, inside my father's house. "

I turned her face towards the window and she stared at the grounds and knot gardens. " It's true, the lawns don't resemble the fields and orchards surrounding my father's house in Springfield, but what of this room? " Desiree' was perplexed.

Father came over to us. " Niece, we fashioned it after your sister's bedroom, and have kept it in loving memory of her. " Desiree' laughed outloud. " Bethanie, what's wrong..have you no fond feelings for your dearly departed twin, Desiree'? "

" I'm not dead yet, although I'm sure Bethanie wishes I was in my grave, buried and forgotten. " Desiree' was past angry. " She's accomplished that vengeful deed by having all of you call me by her name, instead of by my given name of Desiree'. " She positioned herself between my body and the window and asked me who everyone was. I introduced her to Mother and Father, then Marcus placed his hands on her shoulders and called her Bethanie.

She recoiled and screamed. " Don't you dare call me by her name..I'm Desiree'! " Marcus dropped his hands, then backed away as Valera and Dr. Franco entered the room.

Valera gathered Desiree's hands in hers. " I've been treating you with herbal remedies since your accident in Coltsfoot Canyon, and before you married Count Marcus. "

Marcus grimaced, then folded his arms across his chest. I nodded yes as

Desiree' asked if those statements were true.

Dr. Franco spoke up. " Mistress Canossa.."

I whispered, " That's your married name, Desiree'..please listen to what the good doctor has to say. "

" Mistress Canossa, have you no memories of my earlier visits? " Desiree' shook her head no, then Dr. Franco explained what kind of a doctor he was. " Mistress Canossa, your fragile state of mind has overburdened you to the point that your husband has given me permission to work with you, until you're well in mind, body and spirit. " Desiree' wasn't thrilled by that statement. " First of all, I'd do nothing without your consent, as a patient's co-operation is most important in psychological matters. I only wish to help, and I'll await your joint decision. "

Dr. Franco left and Marcus took Desiree's hand. " Bethanie, as your husband, I only want what's best for you. "

Desiree' was mad enough to spit nails. " I'll never speak to you again if you insist on calling me by my sister's name and furthermore, I'll only do what's in my own best interest..with or without your esteemed husbandly approval. " After her tirade, she fainted into Marcus's arms and he carried her back to bed. I knew she was on the verge of having another mental collapse as she told Marcus to leave.

He scowled. " I'll leave, only because I know how difficult this situation is for you, but I'll return later to discuss certain issues in private, Desiree'. I hope you can muster enough respect to call me by my given name as well..and in case your memory fails, it's Marcus. "

Desiree' didn't mince words. " Marcus, I'm truly sorry that I've no concrete memories of you or our life together as husband and wife..all I do know for certain is that I'm not, nor have I ever been Bethanie, and if that's who you think you married, you're sadly mistaken. "

After Mother, Father, and Marcus left Valera wanted to speak to Desiree' in private, but Desiree' said only if I stayed as well.

" Of course, Desiree'. Annelle knows more than anyone what's transpired in

the last few years of your life. "

" Years? "

" Yes, Desiree'.. you're not 16, but 19, and today is Saturday, March 7th, 1877. " Valera filled her in and I confirmed the validity of what was said. " Don't let your guard down with anyone except Annelle and me..even talking with Doctor Franco has its drawbacks. "

Desiree' paid scant attention to what Valera said..she rose, walked to the closet, slammed the door shut and asked if I could lend her something to wear until she had a new wardrobe made. I went to my room and brought back the gown that Valera had presented to her on her wedding eve to Marcus..she slipped it on and danced around the room, but stopped in her tracks when I mentioned that Marcus was giving her permission to go into town to purchase materials.

" Bah! I'm always needing permission from the men in my life..first my father and now a husband I don't even know! "

Valera handed her a tall glass of red liquid. She took one sip and immediately spat it on the floor as if it were poison and not the nourishment her body needed. " What in heaven's name is this?! "

" Sweet nectar of the gods, Desiree'. As a vampire, your body cannot manufacture blood or nutrients like a normal person..without another's Life Force, you only have weeks to live. " Desiree' glanced into the mirror as if she didn't believe a word, then walked through the door and into the hallway.

Marcus met us at the top of the stairs. " Annelle, the glow of impending motherhood becomes you. "

He grabbed Desiree's arm and spoke to her in a condescending manner. " I'm only allowing you outside this house because Dr. Franco says it'll do you some good, and Annelle can keep her eye on you. " She told him she didn't want to be treated as if she were a recalcitrant child.

" As my wife and my responsibility, I'll say what has to be said, whether you agree or not. "

She brightened considerably after Marcus closed the carriage door. The driver let us out in front of the most fashionable dress shop in town, and

once inside the seamstress took her measurements and we spent hours deciding on materials, trims, buttons, bows, styles, and accessories. " Madame Canossa, it'll be two weeks before everything is done and delivered. " The owner smiled and we left.

We strolled down the street towards the outskirts of town and stopped on the front steps of the stoneworked cathedral as Father Quimper came to greet us. He asked about my impending motherhood, then turned to Desiree'. "Miss Desiree', I never forget a face as lovely as yours..God has granted us the esteemed privilege of another meeting. " He paused, but there was no reaction from her.

" Annelle has filled me in on your circumstances, Dear Child..do come inside the church for God's own peace and love. " Faithful parishioners sat in the pews waiting their turn for confessions with the officiating Cardinal and I sat with them, while Father Quimper and Desiree' went to a small private chapel off the main portion. I prayed for Desiree' to be made whole.

By the time we finished the afternoon had given way to twilight, and the carriage waited for us on the cobbled street. Father Quimper kissed both of us on the cheek before we left. " Godspeed and many blessings to both of you..please come back and visit at your convenience. "

Desiree' had good news to impart. " Annelle, Father Quimper has eased my mind regarding Dr. Franco and I want him to help me regain the missing pieces of my life. "

" That's wonderful, Desiree'. " I was very tired, so I rested my head on her shoulder and slept like a baby.

Marcus stood in the doorway as we arrived and nodded to me, but he asked to speak privately to Desiree' and guided her towards the knot gardens. That was the last I ever saw of them. ' "

Marcus seemed confused by what Annelle had written, but didn't say a word as Valera continued.

" ' Sunday, May 17th, 1877. Although I've written time and again to Desiree', I've received no reply and am becoming increasingly worried about her state of mind and how she's progressing..it seems as if everyone associated with her or Marcus has fallen off the face of the earth. Mother's

made inquiries at church about Father Quimper and Dr. Franco, but no one's heard from or about them either. Tomorrow, I'm sending one of my trusted man-servants to Fredericksburg and then to Castle Desiree' so he can bring word directly back to me by Friday, May 22nd, close to a week before my baby's due to enter this world. ' "

" I'm assuming that any letters sent to me were intercepted by Sheridan and then destroyed. " Desiree' sighed.

" ' Friday, May 22nd, 1877. My man-servant's arrived and as the saying goes, no news is good news. He said that Castle Desiree' has been closed until further notice, and the townspeople aren't saying anything as to what may have occurred. I'm afraid the castle's occupants fell prey to a deadly sickness that swept through Fredericksburg not too long ago..my heart must once again grieve for my Sister, Desiree'. ' "

" That's another sin to add to Sheridan's ever growing stack of dirty deeds. "

" Patience, Desiree', patience. " Kermes Twa was firm in her admonition.

" ' Tuesday, June 30th 1877. On Sunday, May 31st Raven Joshua Aleanse was born, named for both our fathers. He has Reven's eyes and nose, and my mouth and there are even faint signs of my family's birthmark on his wrist. Raven is my bundle of joy..always hungry and very active. It's a shame that another 18 months will pass before my husband and father return from their most recent trip aboard Goddess of the Sea.

Saturday, April 15th, 1879. I received an early Christmas surprise on Thursday, December 23rd, 1878, when Reven and Father came through the door.

Father bought Uncle Richard's shipping business as he's fallen ill, and Reven's taking over the American end in San Francisco, having already bought and furnished a house for us near the Pacific Ocean. The last 4 months we've been getting ready for our big move..I know I'll miss everything here in Nancy, but am looking forward to new beginnings.

Saturday, February 2nd, 1882. I've not written in my diary for quite some time as the business of life has taken over..between raising Raven and taking care of the house and servants plus being the perfect hostess for many gatherings and parties, life's been happy and most fulfilling. Fate dealt a full-

house on Thursday, February 2nd, 1880 when a terrible storm raged across the Bay and many lost their lives, including my Cousin Bethanie and her husband, Phillip Connor. Reven and I were the ones who found their bodies washed up on shore, not far from our house. I recognized Bethanie right away, but was more than surprised to learn that Phillip worked as a naval architect for my father's company. Reven had no idea she was my cousin as they'd kept to themselves. Reven contacted the local authorities who put us in touch with the lawyers that handled their estate..they'd left everything to their young son, Phillip, and considering I was his closest living relative, Reven and I were given sole legal authority to adopt Phillip and raise him as our own son. Although I was sad about the circumstances surrounding Phillip, he filled a void in my heart as I could never have any more babies of my own. ' "

We were amazed, but Bethanie most of all. " To think we were in San Francisco at the same time and our paths never crossed..what else does she say, Valera? " Bethanie grabbed the diary from her hands, but disappointment seeped from her eyes as there were no more pages to view or read. " What happened to my son and Annelle, Reven and Raven? "

Bethanie was crestfallen when nothing else was forthcoming. Swifter than a curious cat, she turned and opened Marcus's trunk, but all she managed to find were some dustballs. Marcus laughed. " I haven't the slightest idea why the good doctor wanted my trunk hauled in here..I haven't used it in ages as you can see. "

Dr. Franco glanced at a sheaf of papers. " Bethanie, in the extreme lefthand corner you'll find a small button that I want you to push. " She did and the false bottom slid away to reveal a small compartment that held a clean black leatherbound book with gold engraved lettering.

Marcus saw the name imprinted on the cover and took it from our hands. " Why would someone plant Father Quimper's private notes in my trunk? "

" Maybe because no one would ever think of looking there. " Desiree' voiced her opinion. " Whatever the case, I want to hear what he has to say, Marcus. " We were all ears.

Marcus read out loud. " ' March 28th, 1847. I was sad to see the monastery transfer hands from the pious monks to Count Marcus of Fredericksburg

today, but I've been given a vision from Hella Dracon that events are proceeding as she has decreed. ' "

Desiree' shuddered as a cold chill ran down our spine, but Marcus didn't notice as he said, " I had no idea that Father Quimper and my father knew each other. " He continued. " ' Count Marcus has the funds to restore the monastery to its former glory and I can rejoice in my heart as the monks and I leave for Montague Cathedral to continue our works.

March 28th, 1849. Life has been pleasant and comfortable for the last couple of years at Montague Cathedral, and I've been well pleased by the progress we've made in the surrounding communities and even as far away as Paris and the King's Court.

May 30th, 1849. This morning I received an invitation to attend the wedding of Count Marcus to his future bride, Desiree' Bethanie Franco. ' " Everyone gasped at the mention of her last name, except for Marcus, who didn't seem the least bit surprised.

Desiree's eyes filled with hatred, but before she could spit out words that couldn't be taken back, Marcus offered an explanation. " My mother was the adopted step-daughter of Pierre Franco's brother, so there's no blood relationship as far as I know. " Desiree' seemed genuinely happy and I knew there'd be no chance of reconciliation if the situation had been otherwise.

" ' Their marriage bans have been set for June 30th, and the wedding will take place in the monastery..to say the least, I'm eager to see how it's been restored. I'll be staying with my good friend and fellow believer, Dr. Pierre Franco, who's just started his practice near Fredericksburg.

June 30th, 1849. Desiree' was a frail child who's grown into a woman of porcelain beauty, and I see why Marcus was attracted to her. I've spoken to Pierre and advised him to stay close to Desiree', as she'll have need of him very soon.

October 17th, 1849. Pierre's written to tell me I was right, and that Desiree' is pregnant, expecting her first child to arrive in late March of next year. This baby will be special, a fulfillment of Hella Dracon's future plans.

April 13th, 1850. For the past nine months, I've been busy recruiting 13

monks from among the faithful disciples so they may learn the rites and rituals for special ceremonial services.

A hand delivered note from Pierre confirmed Desiree's passing, but I was overjoyed with the announcement of her healthy male child, Marcus the 2nd.

May 13th, 1860. Hella Dracon had shown me a vision of another special male child to be born, but as with all of life, chosen ones can make unwise decisions and others are put in their place to carry on. Such was the case recently and although plans were altered hastily, the outcome was better than hoped for or expected. ' "

Desiree' silently breathed Phillippe's name and when Bethanie wanted to know why, Desiree' relayed what he'd told her about his early life. Marcus seemed to confirm the fact that Sheridan had taken his place in the next portion of notes from Father Quimper. " ' Marcus the 1st hasn't recovered from his wife's death, but I've spoken to him about his son needing a mother's touch. I introduced him to a recently widowed woman named Rochelle Grenoble and her young daughter, Sheridan. Both father and son seem well-pleased and Marcus and Rochelle were married shortly after Marcus the 2nd turned 10.

April 13th, 1866. Pierre wrote that the elder Marcus had weakened over the years to the point of death and asked me to perform last rites. I traveled to Fredericksburg on March 27th and he managed to last until March 28th, his son's 16th birthday, the legal age of inheritance. ' " Marcus closed his eyes and sighed at all the sad memories.

Dr. Franco took the book away from him. " This is as good a place to stop as any. "

" Doctor, would it be all right if Marcus and I share some private time? " She lifted her eyebrows, then gave her consent after she spoke to him. He wasn't happy, but shook his head yes to whatever she'd said.

Adrian hugged me before he left. " I hope the baby's mine, so I'll have a permanent connection to you, Nancy. "

Valera touched my cheek. " Through thick and thin. " I smiled and felt relieved at her words.

After everyone left, Marcus closed the door and I felt the tiniest distance wiggle its way between us.

" Dr. Franco says you need to rest your body as well as your mind, Nancy. " He handed me a small red pill and a glass of water. " Lay down with me and I'll hold you while you sleep. "

I snuggled my back against his chest, but couldn't get close enough. Marcus must have thought I finally dosed off and he left the bed, opened the door, then closed it silently. I followed suit, but the door was locked tighter than Fort Knox. Desiree' said, " You probably wouldn't have gotten very far at any rate, Nancy. " We spent the rest of the night pacing back and forth.

Thursday Morning

Time hung over our heads like a black cloud as we waited for what seemed like hours. " Nancy, you must prepare yourself. " The Great Goddess spoke as the door opened. I was all smiles until Valera walked in closely followed by Dr. Franco, who handed me a bulky sealed envelope..I drew out legal papers saying Marcus had given Valera power of attorney concerning me. " It won't be long until you'll be going home, Nancy. " I had my own thoughts concerning where home might be, but didn't say anything.

Dr. Franco looked me straight in the eye. " I think you're stable enough to leave as long as you're in Valera's care, but I'll want to see you on a daily basis for a while. "

I didn't want to waste my precious time traveling back and forth to town everyday on treacherous roads for a scheduled appointment. " Could I speak to Valera in private? " Dr.Franco waited outside the door.

" What's wrong, Nancy? You're going to agree to see the doctor, aren't you? "

" Yes, Valera, but as there's plenty of room at the castle, maybe Dr. Franco could move in with us? "

She smiled. " Your ideas mirror my own and I've already made all the arrangements. Gustav's coming to pick us up in a few hours. "

The Mercedes offered warmth and comfort, but the mountainside road was still slick with ice. " Stop the car, Gustav! " Sudden memories hit hard and clear as we rounded a curve. " This is the very spot where the brakes failed on my mother's car. " He parked and turned the hazard lights on.

" It was found in the ravine below and ruled an accident in the final reports. " Gustav draped his arms around me and I cried for my loss.

It was close to 9pm when Sher and Marcus met us at the door. They both frowned and my heart dropped to the floor. " Nancy, I've read the reports that Dr. Franco received from the lab concerning your pregnancy..Adrian's the father, not me! " Marcus was furious. " You can stay in my mother's quarters tonight, but I want you out of here tomorrow morning! " I was stunned and close to fainting as he turned on his heel and left without another word. Sheridan's smile was smug as she ran to catch up with him. Valera and Dr. Franco helped me to the rooms I'd be sleeping in for the last time.

I sank to the bed and Dr. Franco confirmed the fact that Adrian was indeed the father of my baby. She held my hand in a motherly way as I collected my scattered thoughts. " I could either go back to my apartment and raise this child alone or talk to Adrian and see what he has to say. "

" Whatever you decide to do is fine with me, as long as Valera consents to stay with you for the duration of your pregnancy. " Dr. Franco knew her words would please me.

" I've already informed Marcus that I'll be staying with you, Nancy. "

I hugged Valera. " You're a godsend..not just to me, but Desiree' and Bethanie as well. "

Dr. Franco said, " I haven't informed Adrian that he's the father yet..would you like me to take care of that for you? "

" No, I need to take responsibility for my actions now. " Dr. Franco and Valera gave me some much needed privacy as I picked up the phone and dialed Angelo's private number, hoping against hope that Adrian was still there.

It was answered on the second ring.." Angelo's Classiques..may I help you?
"

" Angelo, this is Nancy..it's very important that I speak to Adrian. "

" Hold on for just a minute. " The phone went dead and sickness entered my soul as I waited and wondered what the future held in store.

" Nancy, is something wrong? "

" I have some important news to tell you about the baby..you're going to be a father, Adrian. "

I heard him screaming and shouting with joy, then he sobered up. " No ifs, ands, or buts, Nancy..you're moving in with Angelo and me as soon as you get out of the hospital. "

" I'm already out and at Castle Desiree'. " He let out a huge sigh before I continued. " Adrian, I'm not going to stay here.."

He was estatic as he interrupted my prepared speech. " I love you, Nancy, and I'll come get you in the morning. " I was sure he was floating on all the wind that had been let out of my sails.

Chapter 30

Desiree' didn't seem the least bit upset at our dire circumstances, but reacted in her own peculiar way; she opened my trunk and tittered as she rummaged through all of my personal possessions, and I saw that all her belongings had been placed in there as well. " Did you think that Sher would let one speck of you or me remain here with Marcus, Nancy? "

The nightglow dial on my watch showed the time was already past midnight. " I guess not, Desiree'. " I thought of Marcus and our now failed wedding plans.

" Don't get yourself into a blue funk, Nancy. Even though we won't be

marrying him tomorrow, it's best we fall on our knees and pay homage to the Great Goddess. " I had no idea what Desiree' was talking about as she rolled her eyes. " This is Friday, the 13th, her holiest of days, and she says we must concentrate on moving forward in our new life. " She patted our belly. " Remember, the play isn't over until the fat lady sings. "

I shook my head. " What's that supposed to mean, Desiree'? "

" You'll know soon enough. " Desiree' and Bethanie spoke as one, then laughed as Valera and Dr. Franco came through the door.

" Valera, when I spoke to Adrian he agreed that both you and Dr. Franco will be welcome additions to Angelo's home. " While they slept, I paced back and forth and not even Desiree's self-assurance could calm my nerves.

I answered Gustav's knock. " Countess Nancy, Adrian has arrived. " Tears glistened in his eyes. " I'm so sorry that you won't be staying with us, you know how much Count Marcus needs me now and Valera will keep you safe. " He kissed my cheek, then hauled my trunk downstairs.

Adrian couldn't contain his happiness, while I steeled myself against any emotions. I climbed into Adrian's SUV and took one last glance at Castle Desiree'. Marcus stood on the second floor landing with no expression on his face, so there was no telling if he was happy or sad at my departure. Valera handed me a small bottle of sweet tasting green liquid. " This fresh violet juice will help you sleep for a while. "

I laid my head on Adrian's lap and woke up when we came to a sudden stop in front of the picture postcard setting of White Wolf Lodge. " I thought we were going to Springfield and Angelo's Classiques, Adrian. "

" Danger lurks in familiar places and we're only making a pit stop here. " Adrian was in full control.

Angelo met us at the door and I hugged him, feeling a bit of peace enter my soul. " Countess Nancy, it's good to see your smiling face once again. " He kissed Valera on the cheek and shook Dr. Franco's hand. " Lunch is served. "

I had no appetite for the ham and cheese sandwiches and found myself

wandering into a section of the cabin I hadn't seen before. There were dozens of wolf pictures on the walls and nature books scattered about, but I was mesmerized by a gilt-framed oil painting. "That's my mother, Lorraine." Adrian materialized beside me at the foot of his four-poster bed.

Her ebony tresses and dark brown eyes were in stark contrast to Adrian's blond hair and blue-eyed piercing stare. "She's very beautiful." He lifted the back of my hand to his lips and kissed my flesh, then offered me his wrist on which to feed; his blood to nourish me, so I could nourish his child. "Thank you, Adrian; not just for your life force, but for not pushing me." I sighed. "There aren't any easy answers in my heart and soul right now."

He smiled, then looked at his watch. "I know, Nancy, and although I'm in no rush, it's time for us to leave."

"Where are we going, Adrian?"

"To our destiny, Nancy..to our destiny."

I hoped that putting my trust in Adrian wouldn't come back to haunt me as we left behind all things familiar. Angelo and Adrian split driving shifts, sticking to two-lane blacktops and back-roads on our cross-country trip to the wilds of Montana.

The mountainous areas were snow-capped backdrops to the sun-rise of Wednesday morning, February 18th. Adrian finally pulled up in front of a rustic log cabin and a tall man with curly red hair came down the steps, shouting and hollering to beat the band. "I'm certainly glad my son has decided to come home, and it's a triple blessing that he brought along such beautiful female visitors. By the way, the name on this end is Jackson Connor." He winked in Angelo's direction, then shook his hand. "It's good to have you back in this neck of the woods." He greeted Valera and Dr. Franco with quick hugs, but his eyes lingered on me. His embrace was warm and we became instant friends. "Welcome to my humble abode, Lorraine's Lodge." Snow crunched under our boots as we walked up the steps and inside to a roaring fire that crackled and hissed, casting gleams of light on the polished redwood floor. Nature books lined one wall, while photographs and oil paintings filled the empty spaces on the adjoining walls.

“ Everyone, have a seat and relax. ” Jackson served us strong coffee and lemon pound cake and I listened to the three men chit-chat about how much the natural land had changed over the years. When he began clearing dishes, I followed him into the kitchen. “ That son of mine called and said he was bringing some friends to visit, but he didn’t mention one word about having a beautiful girlfriend. ” He faced me directly. “ I can see how special you are to him and how much he loves you. ”

I didn’t deny the fact. “ Jackson, I’m pregnant with Adrian’s child and he’s asked me to marry him. ” I laid his hand on my belly and he gave me a questioning look. “ Our relationship has been quite complicated and I haven’t accepted his proposal, yet. ”

“ But you're going to? ”

“ I was hoping you’d help me plan a surprise wedding. ”

Jackson beamed with happiness. “ Let me take care of the details for you. ” He made a quick phone call. “ Judge Arnold’s a good friend of mine and everything’s arranged for a civil ceremony on Saturday evening if you’re agreeable. ” I nodded my head while thoughts of not being married to Marcus flooded my heart and soul.

Jackson placed the phone in its cradle just as Adrian whooshed through the door. “ I see that spark in your eyes, Dad; what're you up to? ”

“ Not a thing, Adrian. Nancy says she’s had a sudden attack of claustrophobia and needs some fresh air. Why don’t the two of you take a walk up Whisper Mountain before bad weather sets in later this afternoon? ” Any thoughts of his father having ulterior motives swiftly disappeared and Adrian guided me towards the front door. “ We’ll be back in time for lunch. ”

Before we took the first step, Valera called my name. “ Nancy, Angelo has agreed to let Dr. Franco and myself use his townhouse for tonight, but we’ll return by late tomorrow afternoon. ” She handed me a small bag of potions and kissed me on the cheek. Adrian and I waved good-bye as Angelo drove them away.

The sun was buttercup yellow against the cloudless blue sky when we

reached the top of a winding hill and Adrian pointed out larch, spruce, western red cedar, and an alpine meadow towards the north. “ Beyond that meadow is the aspen grove where I met the white wolf. ” A dark shadow passed over us and we watched a lone falcon land on an outcropping of bare granite. He settled down and extended his wings as far as they would go. “ His landing on the north-east tip of the rock is a signal for us to embrace and integrate the personal lessons we’ve learned as we travel together on Life’s Pathway. ”

The falcon flew away as fat snowflakes began to fall; soon our vision was obscured by a veil of swirling white and Kermes Twa made her presence known. “ Without Adrian and me to guide and direct your life, you’d be more than lost right now, Nancy. ” The Great Goddess was right as usual.

Jackson was waiting at the door when we reached the cabin. “ I hope you two are hungry. ” After eating thick hunter’s stew and drinking hot cocoa for lunch, we followed him down a short hall into an eclectic hideaway that ranged from wood sculptures and totems to handmade quilts, gazing balls, tarot cards, and gypsy runes. “ Nancy, this was Lorraine's most private space and you’re welcome to use it as your bedroom, if you want. ” Desiree’ drew in a sharp breath when she recognized paintings of DuMond House lining the walls. “ What’s wrong? ” I stared at each picture in turn and was totally surprised when the last few showed a woman holding a baby girl. I removed the locket that Dr. Franco had given to me and handed it to Jackson, then explained my circumstances. “ Let me give Judge Arnold a buzz and see what he can find out for you. ”

When Jackson left, Adrian draped his arm protectively around my shoulders. “ I was right to bring you here, Nancy. ”

“ Tell me about your mother, Adrian. ” He patted the bed and I removed my shoes, then slipped under the soft down comforter as he reverently opened the lone book that lay on her dresser.

He pulled a rocking chair near the bed and began. “ ‘ My name is Lorraine Kristoffe and as with all stories, the past is connected to the future. My mother’s people are part of the Romnichels, generally known as Gypsies. Roma origins began on the Indian subcontinent over one thousand years ago when they entered southeastern Europe in the last quarter of the 13th Century. Because they arrived in Europe from the East, many thought they

hailed from Turkey, Nubia or Egypt, so they were called Egyptians or ‘Gyptians, which is where the word ‘Gypsy’ comes from.

My father and his father and his father before him dealt in trading horseflesh and one of the great stories that was passed down through the generations happened at the Turlough Horse Festival near Fredericksburg in 1876. My ancestor knew that the local men were partial to Arabian horseflesh so he dressed and acted the part, not to deceive in the selling, but to make sure his family had enough food to eat and clothes to wear. He sold the finest black Arabian horse to Count Marcus of Fredericksburg and after seeing his beautiful companion, urged him to buy her a gentle grey Andalusian. The day was made complete when Natalia, the young lady's chaperone and one of his mother's good friends, bought an exquisite bolt of rich red velvet from her table.’ ”

“ That was a day of many contrasting emotions. ” Desiree’ laughed as she told Adrian the story, beginning with the book she found in Marcus’s own handwriting.

“ What do you feel in your heart for Marcus? ” Adrian asked the inevitable question.

“ Everything from the highest highs to the lowest lows and what passes for in-between. No matter what comes in Nancy’s life, Marcus is the only man I could ever give my heart and soul to. ” Desiree’ was gentle in her approach. “ But I am fond of you, Adrian, and I hope that counts for something. ”

“ It definitely does, Desiree’. ”

“ I’m much more than fond of you, Adrian. ” Bethanie put her 2 cents worth into the mix.

He knew better than to ask about my feelings and continued reading from Lorraine’s journal.

“ ‘With monies made from that day my forebears knew providence had smiled upon them and the next generation was able to make the move to the great land of America in 1897. They bought a thousand acres of good horse-breeding land on the Deerfield River in North Central Massachusetts. Life treated them kindly for many years, but the early 60’s brought about hard times and my parents used their artistic talents as flamenco dancers to keep

their inheritance from being foreclosed on.

My mother said that the flamenco style originated in Andalusia, then spread across the Iberian Peninsula to Spanish America; over the years flamenco song, dance, and guitar playing became an accepted form of popular entertainment throughout the world.

My parents formed a dance troupe and we traveled across America in a VW bus. I was never allowed to attend regular school, but my mother was a wonderful teacher. When I was seventeen, our dance troupe put on a performance at a small Montana university. The moment I laid eyes on Jackson Connor, I knew we'd be married, even though it was forbidden by Gypsy law to marry outside of our family.

He was a young forestry student with extensive knowledge of Indian folklore, animal totems and Mother Nature. On our very first date Jackson asked me my birth date. When I told him February 21st at midnight, he said it was his birthday also, and we were linked to the wolf totem. “ The wolf soul is highly intuitive, sensitive, compassionate and tender, and cringes at the thought of others existing in pain or suffering. Lorraine, the exact time of your birth sets you as part of the distinctive gray wolf totem; as you explore the world, you experience the inner fire of transformation throughout your life, adapting to all life's challenges as love guides you on your journey. ” From the moment Jackson entered my life, I was forever changed.’ ”

I noticed Jackson standing in the doorway, listening to Adrian speak. “ The first time I saw your mother, I knew she was the one for me. The sun formed a halo behind her head and she reminded me of the song, ‘Earth Angel.’ Even though we only had a short time together, she provided me with the greatest gift of all. ” He gave his son a big hug, and my heart was happy at this sign of family bonding. “ Adrian also shares our birthday and is part of the Arctic wolf totem; as he overcomes Life’s numerous challenges and setbacks, he emerges stronger than before, and is given the wisdom to know that he is worthy of the bounty he receives. ”

They opened their arms to me and I joined them in a group hug and felt safe and secure. Kermes Twa said, “ Your love adds balance to their overburdened scales, the warmth of home fires burning in the darkest night of the soul. ”

I wondered how that could be when I had so many issues to deal with inside myself. Kermes Twa gave me the answer through Adrian's voice. " Nancy, you were born under the owl totem and as such, want to understand all about Life's many mysteries. Each new situation and encounter brings about better understanding and appreciation for others and one of your greatest natural abilities is to see the positive in all. A deep sense of satisfaction is brought about by nesting and nurturing, concentrating and focusing on hidden secrets within yourself. The lesson of true union comes through integrating personality, emotion, mind, and soul. " He winked and I thought of Desiree' and Bethanie, then yawned. The clock struck midnight. " Let me get you some fresh towels so you can shower and rest. "

Hot water enveloped my body in a sense of urgency and I finished post-haste. I didn't bother to say a word as I slipped out the back door, following the sounds of a screech owl in the distance. I walked past the meadow that Adrian had pointed out and found myself in a thick aspen grove. The owl sat midway up a tree in a circular opening, then quickly flew away when I spotted him. Always the curious one, Desiree' took it upon herself to thrust her entire arm inside the hole and removed a mildewed leather bag.

The hair on the nape of my neck stood at attention and I slowly turned around, coming face to face with the growling snout of a ferocious-looking white wolf. I was ready to turn tail and run like the wind. " He won't harm you. " Adrian stepped from the shadows. " I see you've found my secret stash. The same day the white wolf joined his spirit to mine, Angelo brought this bag to me, saying it was an inheritance from my mother; I've waited all this time for my mate to find it, so the true meaning of its inner contents could be revealed. "

He put his arm around my shoulders and we walked back to Lorraine's room. Adrian undid the golden clasp and a small black box inscribed with BTC in bright red lettering fell out. Bethanie gasped and grabbed it from his hand. She opened it and Desiree' almost fainted when she saw the familiar medallion star that Dr. Pierre Franco had used to hypnotize her with. Bethanie took no notice. " Sheridan gave this to Phillip and me on our 3rd wedding anniversary and said it would bring us good luck. " She sighed and read the engraved words on the back. " 'May the gods grant you what you so richly deserve.' "

" Seems as if Sheridan had a grudge against you and Phillip, Dear Sister, but

the question remains, why? ”

A small piece of paper was snuggled tight inside the box and I lifted it out and gave it to Adrian. “ ‘I write this in the privacy of my heart and soul as a legacy to the baby Jackson and I will have. Although I’m happy, what the future holds for any of us is a big question mark.

My parents never discussed the dark beginnings of our American gypsy vampire tribe, but said that she and my father didn’t share their values and parted company, fearing for my safety. Angelo helped them change their identities and they traveled cross-country to Montana with me, and settled into their new lives as teachers of gypsy culture.

I told them I was going to marry Jackson and my mother gave me words of advice. ‘Lorraine, becoming pregnant by an outsider can bring about unforeseen consequences that I don’t know how to deal with. ’ She showed me how to make an herbal tea consisting of juniper and barberry and told me to drink it at the beginning of my menstrual cycle, but being young and in love, I tended to forget and nature took its course. My parents went for a short retreat into the mountains, but haven’t returned and I’m sure something bad has happened to them. Since Angelo has moved back to Springfield, I am without a means to secure fresh blood on a daily basis and have become weaker and weaker. Although Jackson’s taken me to many of his people’s doctors, they tell me there’s no cure for unknown causes and I can’t tell them what I’m in desperate need of.

I feel my labor pains coming on and have finally contacted Angelo and asked for his assistance to deliver my baby.’ ”

Adrian turned the paper over, but it was blank. “ I’ll always be here for you and our baby, Nancy. ” He placed his hand on my mid-section, then gathered me into his arms.

Kermes Twa spoke. “ Even though your life’s path is filled with dangerous pitfalls, Adrian’s love will protect you and your baby from any and all harm. ”

Emanating from a corner of my trunk was a pulsing red light. Adrian opened the lid cautiously, but we both laughed when Desiree’s necklace came into

view and I clasped it around my neck. “ I remember seeing this necklace glow as I sang ‘Think Or Feel’ to you. ”

“Don’t allow anyone but Adrian to have access to your rubied heartbeat. ” The Great Goddess infused the crystal with a triple beat as Adrian kissed me, and I felt no guilt or shame where Marcus was concerned.

I sighed in contentment and closed my eyes, knowing I’d be safe in Adrian’s arms. It was 4 o’clock Thursday afternoon when a tapping came at the door and I didn’t think twice before mumbling, “ Come in. ” Shocked looks passed over Valera and Dr. Franco’s faces, and I realized Adrian was still in bed with me. Desiree’ and Bethanie laughed outloud as Adrian excused himself from the all female presence.

“ Nancy, would you care to fill us in on what’s happening between you and Adrian? ” I had a feeling Valera already knew, but wanted Dr. Franco to hear the words from my lips.

“ To get down to the nitty gritty, I’m going to marry Adrian this Saturday evening, although he doesn’t know it yet. ”

Dr. Franco frowned as another knock sounded at the door. Jackson stood there with a huge grin on his face. “ I have someone who wants to meet you, Nancy. ”

“ We’ll continue this discussion later on. ” Dr. Franco was stern.

I brushed my hair and put on my best of smiles. A distinguished older gentleman sat in front of the fireplace, but rose when I entered the room. Jackson introduced him as Judge Arnold and he shook my hand, then pulled out a chair at the kitchen table. “ Have a seat, Miss Adams. ” I drew a blank for a minute, then remembered that was my real last name. “ My first law practice was in Springfield and my very first client was your mother. ” I listened intently to every word he said as he explained all the legal issues.

“ What about my father? ”

“ The only time your mother mentioned him was to say she’d been married briefly, but that Joseph Adams had been killed in an accident on the very night they wed. I assumed they’d consummated the marriage and you were

the result. Judge Arnold continued. “ You’re a very lucky young woman, Nancy. According to province law, if a legal heir hadn’t come forward by the end of 24 years, all rights would have been forfeited and the house and estate reverted back to Marcus Canossa. ”

That shocked Desiree’, Bethanie and me, but we didn’t have time to dwell on the matter as Adrian strolled in. “ Is everything ok, Nancy? You and the judge have been in here for over 3 hours. ”

I told him about what Judge Arnold and I had discussed. “ I have to go to France before the year is out to sign the papers. ” There was so much to think about that I felt overwhelmed and tears of exhaustion filled my eyes.

“ You need nourishment and rest. ” Adrian walked me back to his mother’s room. Valera had begun treating him with herbs and his strength and stamina remained intact, even when I fed from him.

Dr. Franco came to my door. “ I need to speak privately to Nancy. ” Adrian kissed my forehead and left.

“ I don’t think marrying Adrian on the rebound will be good for you, Desiree’ or Bethanie as many problems are sure to arise. Tell me what you really feel for Count Marcus. ”

I took a deep breath. “ His actions are an enigma, leaving me either burning hot or blowing cold, with no middle ground to base real love on. ” I looked her in the eye. “ Adrian’s love for me has never wavered in words or actions and I want my baby to know both of his or her parents..neither Adrian nor I had that chance. ”

“ You’ve told me what Adrian feels for you and I know it’s the truth, but what do you feel for him? ”

Dr. Franco listened to Bethanie’s answer first. “ Marriage is made up of spiritual, emotional and physical aspects and once we’ve said I do, it will be a marriage in every sense of the word. ”

Desiree’ said, “ I second that emotion. ” I knew she didn’t mean a word of it.

Everyone waited for my answer. “ Adrian will have all of me when

we wed. ”

Dr. Franco didn't seem convinced and in reality, neither was I. She handed me a large sheaf of papers. “ Before you jump into a marriage with Adrian, read these, then make up your mind. ”

She left and Valera came to see me. “ The Great Goddess knows of your doubts and hesitations, but you and Adrian are the fulfillment of balance that the universe seeks. His innocence evolves from the roots of darkness and your darkness from the very essence of innocence. ” She glanced at the papers I held in my hands. “ Don't be swayed by what you read. ”

I didn't want to be alone. “ Valera, please stay with me. ” She touched my cheek and sat by the bed. The first paragraph stated that Marcus had read what was contained within and had consented to therapy sessions with Dr. Franco in order to resolve his part in Desiree's death. “ I knew he had good reasons for sending us away. ” Desiree' was ecstatic.

“ I think it best I read them outloud to you as I was with Marcus and Dr. Franco. ” I knew Valera didn't want Desiree' to give me any ideas about running back to Marcus on the spur of the moment. She went back to the last paragraph Father Quimper had written. “ ‘Pierre has kept me informed of the progress that's been made with the family, but has explained that Marcus the 1st never completely recovered from Desiree's death and will more than likely die within the week. His doctors thought that grief finally did him in, but Rochelle has helped the process along by giving him daily doses of mandrake. It caused Marcus to sleep for hours on end, and when awake he had devastating hallucinations. Pierre has asked me to perform last rites and I'll travel to Fredericksburg tomorrow. He managed to last until his son's 16th birthday, the legal age of inheritance. Marcus the 2nd is holding up quite well on the outside, but I know his heart is broken.

Hella Dracon has informed me that she is well pleased with Rochelle and as a special gift, will allow Sheridan to marry Marcus to complete our circle. He was chosen because of his great passion and loyalty and Sheridan will have no problems in persuading him that the true worship of Hella Dracon will give both of them eternal life. That will be further down the road as Sheridan is only 13 and must be groomed to play the part of gracious hostess and wife, and Marcus will be going to the university to learn all about wines and winemaking so he can run his father's estate; then and only then will the

mating take place.’ ” I wondered how Marcus had reacted to that portion of the notes and my question was answered.

“ At that point, Dr. Franco asked Marcus if he was willing to undergo hypnosis to help him remember any details he might have forgotten over the years. He agreed and she took out Pierre Franco’s star medallion. ‘Take a deep breath and begin with your father’s death.’ ”

“ ‘I knew without a doubt my father didn’t have long to live on the earth, but always thought it was because he missed my mother so much. I always blamed myself for her death and knew he did too.’ ” He drew his hands across his face and wept bitterly. “ ‘It never occurred to me that Sheridan and Rochelle wanted him dead for their own evil purposes.’ ”

“ When I first met Marcus, his giving nature was to see the good inside those he met, but Sheridan changed all that. ” Desiree’ and I both wished we could hold him in our arms and tell him how much we loved him, but realized the impossibility of the situation.

Marcus had given as much if not more than he’d taken from me and the love I had for him welled into tears of frustration. “ It’s only natural that your emotions are intensifying now that you’re pregnant. This is the same way I felt about Phillippe when I was kept from him, but you’re lucky you have good feelings about Adrian. ” Bethanie didn’t have to add the last part about hating Marcus.

The Great Goddess added her wisdom. “ Without Adrian’s life force to calm your apprehensions and give you perspective, you’ll slowly go mad. ” As if on cue he waltzed through the door carrying a tray of sandwiches and soup.

After we finished eating, he got up to leave and I made my decision. “ Stay with me, Adrian. ” He grinned from ear to ear and climbed on the bed. I laid my head on his chest and listened to his steady heartbeat as Valera brought him up to speed, then began reading again.

“ ‘For the last six years plans have gone smoothly and we’ve been using the chapel behind Montague Cathedral to ready the monks for the King’s special services, but the chapel was recently desecrated by a young woman named Desiree’ Terrance. She was traveling through the area with two gentlemen I had become friends with; her Uncle Joshua and Phillippe Grenoble.’ ”

Marcus interjected. 'Desiree' might have been mischievous, but she'd never desecrate anything considered to be holy. Father Quimper must be mistaken.'

"That's when Dr. Franco handed him the rest of Annelle's papers, along with the missing pages that I had removed. Also included was the evil note that had been slipped into the poetry book that Phillippe had given to Desiree'."

Desiree' shivered as she said the words. "Do you think you can escape the fate of your destiny? Your profanity has doomed you to life beyond Hell."

"'When Desiree' came up to our room after her afternoon visit with Phillippe, she seemed sad and ill at ease. As I brushed her hair, she asked if I knew anything about Montague Cathedral and Father Quimper.

'Many of the stories I've heard are pure flights of fancy, told by those who wish to discredit the Church and all she stands for. They say the Chapel was built on consecrated ground, dedicated to a hideous god of unknown regions who wears a hooded robe to hide his facial features. The priests worship the name of Blaec Toth Snaca; he has the body of a man and the head of a snake with sharp fangs and red eyes that glow in the dark. It's said he's cruel and bloodthirsty, ruling the forces of chaos and confusion.'

Desiree' asked if I believed and I told her there are many things that I do not understand or wish to believe. 'I've met Father Quimper on a few occasions and he seemed like a caring priest, deeply devoted to his church and God. It's doubtful he would allow evil practices to go on there.' I fluffed her hair and we went to bed.

The next afternoon when we went to town with Mother and Father I told Desiree' of a certain cathedral which housed the tombs of Dukes and Cardinals in its basement. We walked briskly to the outskirts of town and entered the church I had spoken of. The inner coolness was inviting and at the end of the wide center aisle the lit altar candles flickered. I laid a coin in the offering box and picked up two unlit candles. 'Quickly light your candle and follow me.' I glanced around and made sure no one saw us, then pushed on a short recessed door near the back wall. 'It's a sacrilege for females to visit the tombs, but I've never been caught.' I led the way into the mazed

catacombs, sneaking by many open rooms, then made a right turn that branched off into a huge hall. I stopped in front of dozens of gold and brass caskets shaped like sphinxes with massive lion's paws. Intricate snake designs were carved on their lids and Desiree' asked me what the symbols meant. I lost my train of thought when male voices drifted towards us. We scrunched into a small alcove and pressed our backs hard against the wall, praying for invisibility as crimson robed monks filed past one by one. They formed a circle and chanted unknown phrases, then one monk raised his hands for silence, as he separated himself from the group. 'My Brothers, the time is close at hand. Once the full moon rises, the symbolic offering shall be readied for us.'

'Ohhm,' was their collective response.

Desiree' was quite shaken by our ordeal and said we must leave this demon place before we were presented as human sacrifices. Her fright was contagious and we ran back to the main sanctuary, then knelt in front of the altar and crossed ourselves. We sat in the front pew to catch our breath, then followed a group of older ladies out into blessed daylight. The Fountain Of Neptune in Stanislas Square welcomed us and we dangled our feet in the sparkling water. I asked Desiree' what she meant in the catacombs and she told me the monk who stood apart from the others was the same man she'd seen at Montague Chapel.

I laughed. 'Desiree', I do believe you've read too many morbid tales, and your imagination is working overtime. Consider today as your last big adventure before school starts.' I held her hand in a sisterly fashion. 'Those holy men were just talking of the spiritual realms here on earth and in heaven above. They meant no harm, although I'm sure they would've had the local Cardinal bar us from attending church for a month or so.' I shrugged my shoulders. 'The chapel at home would be put to good use, so all in all it wouldn't matter.' "

Valera returned to reading Father Quimper's papers. " 'I saw Miss Terrance once again in the catacombs beneath the Nancy Cathedral where an emergency meeting was held in order to determine how best to cleanse the chapel. That's when I learned that Hella Dracon would mete out severe punishment for her when the time was right.

Life returned to normal until this same Desiree' came to live with Sheridan,

her mother and Marcus the 2nd. Although Sheridan and her mother tried their best to find her a suitable husband, Marcus upset all of their best laid plans when he married Desiree' in a surprise service on her 18th birthday, but Sheridan assures me it won't be long until her fate is signed, sealed and delivered.

It is with heartfelt joy that I received the good tidings from Sheridan herself on this blessed day of December 13th, 1875. Desiree' has been arrested and thrown in to the Parisian Dungeon for the most hardened of murderers and thieves. I believed she'd be left to rot in that hellhole, but was overjoyed when I saw that she was our human sacrifice for his Royal Highness's induction into the worship of Hella Dracon. Although I wasn't a partaker of her blood, I was happy that Sheridan saw her bitter enemy suffer so much pain and torment right in front of her eyes. As a fitting end to her life, she was unceremoniously dumped back into the dungeon.

After Marcus was told of Desiree's death, he couldn't be consoled and moved to America, taking Sheridan along with him. She hopes a fresh start will help him forget his former life and that he'll fall in love with her.

Months passed in peace and contentment, but unholy forces have brought about the untimely deaths of our original 13 monks. Not long after, we suffered another setback when 2 of our most prominent and beloved members went to America on official business, and disappeared after visiting with a New York socialite named Queen Rose.

My heart was further burdened with grief for our true worshipers when Sheridan informed us that Desiree' was still alive and pretending to be her twin sister, Bethanie. She bedeviled Marcus and he fell in love with her all over again and married her under false pretenses.

Marcus's original sin of falling in love with Desiree' when he was promised to Sheridan has caused all of our misfortunes, but his redemption is forthcoming as he's tasted blood and is becoming the embodiment of Blaec Toth Snaca. His wife has had a mental breakdown and he's bringing her back to Castle Desiree' for treatment by Pierre. What Marcus doesn't know is that Pierre will plant false memories in her mind and not the reality of what was done to her. In time, she'll receive her just rewards by Marcus's own two hands.

On Saturday, March 7th, 1877 I was honored to meet again with Mistress Desiree' and very pleased that she had no memories of me. She was with her cousin, Annelle, who stayed in the main church waiting her turn for confession while I took Desiree' to a small private chapel that was used for unusual circumstances.

I asked if she had any confessions to make before I prayed for her soul and the swift return of her memory. 'Just an overall forgiveness for what I can't remember.'

I patted her hand and asked her to kneel with me before a polished rosewood cross while I prayed to a God I actually didn't believe in any more. When we were through I helped her up and motioned her to a comfortable chair near my desk. She sat and I poured wine that had been dedicated to Hella Dracon into a crystal goblet and handed it to her. 'This holy water will cleanse your heart and soul, thus allowing God to attune your will to his.' My heart lit up when she mentioned she had already spoken with Dr. Franco. 'He's a good man and an excellent psychiatrist that you can trust to restore your memories so your life can be fulfilled in all ways.'

By the time we finished the afternoon had given way to twilight, and the carriage waited for Annelle and Mistress Canossa on the cobbled street. 'Godspeed and many blessings to both of you.'

Hella Dracon allowed me to travel to our holy Monasterium Damnare in order to assist Sheridan and Marcus in finally doing away with Desiree'. On Monday morning, March 9th, 1876, I waited at the bolted door which led to the monastery's catacombs until Pierre and Desiree' arrived. Pierre left her in my care and I asked if she enjoyed history. She nodded yes and after I unlocked the door we walked down a flight of stone worked stairs. Desiree' looked into the vaults which housed the coffins of our dearly departed believers as I recounted the gallery stories. She looked frightened, so I ushered her into the cloister. When she beheld the gargoyles, she turned her face into my robes, just as I had hoped. 'Desiree', there's nothing here to harm or hurt you; these gargoyles were originally designed to serve as rainwater spouts and some said they scared away evil spirits.' I held her close until she calmed down. 'My Dear, I had no idea you'd react as you did. I mainly wished to show you the small sacristy where the original monks worshipped. God's soothing presence is there to unburden your heart and bring you peace.'

We entered the archway and glorious light filtered through the rose window. 'Keep your eyes open and focused on God's window as you talk to Him, Desiree'. Once I was sure that she was under Hella Dracon's hypnotic spell, I left and came back 30 minutes later. Her neck still had fresh blood oozing from the Great Goddess's bite marks. She said she wasn't feeling well, so I walked her back to her room.

"It's no wonder I felt dreadful after those sessions." Desiree' was thoughtful. "What did Marcus have to say about that portion of Father Quimper's papers?"

"His teeth were clinched, but he kept all his emotions hidden deep inside, fearing an outburst would defeat the purpose of his being there." Valera shook her head. "That's not the reaction we hoped for, so the good doctor handed him Pierre Franco's papers."

Chapter 31

When my brother Luther and his wife were unable to conceive a child after being married for 10 years, I convinced them to adopt the baby daughter of an impoverished woman and her husband, who already had 6 children that they couldn't feed. They took my advice and Elise and Luther are happier than I've seen them in ages. They have named her Desiree' Bethanie Franco..she has black curly hair and startling lavender eyes..she was always a frail child and I was very glad that I was attending university in order to become a doctor of medicine..later on unforeseen circumstances would bid me study the human psyche and how it interacts with the body and soul..

I developed a lasting friendship with Johann Quimper, who was studying for the priesthood, although Catholicism wasn't his religion of choice. He brought me to the great understanding of Hella Dracon, Theophanic Goddess of Blood..true worship and devotion to her are the only requirements..13 is her holy number and as such there are 13 holy monks who are well-versed in the rites and rituals, the major one being the monthly sacrifice of those who

have desecrated her holy temples. My schedule has not allowed me time to attend a sacrifice yet, but I know it will be more than special when I am able to do so.

I have just started my medical practice near Fredericksburg and have seen Desiree' grow into a beautiful young woman..she has agreed to become the wife of Count Marcus Canossa of Fredericksburg. Their marriage banns have been set for one month and the wedding will take place inside the newly renovated Monasterium Damnare, where the original worship for Hella Dracon took place..Johann has received his invitation and will be staying with me as my most welcome guest. He has urged me to stay close to Desiree' per orders of Hella Dracon.

It's been 3 months since Desiree' was married and she came to my office today..she is pregnant with her first child, but is not a strong woman physically, so I've ordered strict bedrest until the baby arrives in late March of next year, 1850. I've written to Johann to break the good news.

With Desiree' spending much of her time resting, Hella Dracon has told me that Desiree's first child must be consecrated to her service, but Desiree' has refused. I delivered a healthy male baby for her and Count Marcus, but the Great Goddess required Desiree's life in exchange for her selfishness. I couldn't staunch the flow of blood after the delivery, and soon Desiree' passed into the next world.

Marcus the 1st was heartbroken and for many years wandered in a daze of sorrow..that's when I decided to study in the field of psychiatry and see if I could find some solution to his problems. Things seemed to get better when Johann introduced him to a recently widowed woman named Rochelle Grenoble and her young daughter, Sheridan. Both father and son seem well-pleased and Marcus and Rochelle were married shortly after the younger Marcus turned 10. Even though I thought that Marcus was making progress with life and living, I doubt that he's ever fully recovered from Desiree's death. My prognosis was proved right when Marcus the Elder passed away on Marcus the 2nd's 16th birthday.

Shortly thereafter I moved my practice to Paris, in order to study under the esteemed tutelage of BaacCeth Talon, noted hypnotist and mind manipulator. My studies served the purpose of Hella Dracon, exclusively.

I first heard of Desiree' Terrance through Johann, who said she was nothing more than a troublemaker for the Great Goddess and must be disposed of. The next time I heard her name she'd had a nervous breakdown and had lost 3 years of memories..Johann wrote and told me I was supposed to come to the DuMond House near Nancy in order to supplant her real memories with ones of the Great Goddess's making.

I was met at the train station by Valera Jesamain, who filled me in on Desiree's current state of mind., which boded well for what the Goddess had in mind..when we arrived at DuMond house I had a short visitation with her husband, the 2nd Count Marcus of Fredericksburg..Johann insisted that I work with him as well, and turn him away from the love he has in his heart for Desiree' and that's exactly what I did from the first moment I spoke to him. In my possession was an unusual scarf that had been made for each of Hella Dracon's followers, and Sheridan's had been imbued with special properties so she could bring Marcus to her side, and as long as the scarf was in his possession whatever was told to him about Desiree' would be taken as gospel truth by him with no questions being asked. After I had checked her out a few times, I told him I would help his wife recover, both physically and mentally and her rightful memories and all would eventually be fine in their relationship.

Soon after he married Desiree' the first time around. Sheridan took him for a walk near the hedgerows and gave him a push into the stickers..as he wiped his blood off, it was offered as a sacrifice to Hella Dracon, and contrary to what the Count believes about Desiree' turning him into a vampire, it was his unknowing sacrifice to Hella Dracon that started his downwards spiral. Sheridan put the last drop of his innocent blood into a crystal for safe keeping in case unforeseen circumstances happened.

We all gasped at that revelation and I'm sure that Marcus seethed with controlled rage when he read that his mind had been manipulated by Sheridan and then Dr. Franco.

Kermes Twa whispered, " Guard that blood with your life, Nancy. " I fingered the crystal that hung around my neck and wondered what unforeseen circumstances the Great Goddess had in mind.

The 2nd afternoon I was at the DuMond house, Valera and I heard a loud screaming from above us and we ran upstairs to Desiree's room. Desiree' had

no memories of our earlier visitations and asked why she had no memories of earlier events in her life. " Ah, well..my name is Dr. Pierre Franco. I'm a medical doctor as well as a psychiatrist, or a doctor of the mind, if you will. Now to your question of no memories..much of the time we don't know specific causes or reasons as to why the mind retrogrades. Some men of medicine speculate that the brain does it in order to protect itself from excruciating traumas and episodes it's not ready to face or comprehend..in your case, it's probably due to lack of recuperation time from your accident, and lowered resistance to outside stimuli. Mistress Canossa, your fragile state of mind has overburdened you to the point that your husband gave me permission to work with you, until you're well in mind, body and spirit. " She narrowed her eyes to mere slits and I knew I had to gain her confidence. " First of all, I'd do nothing without your permission..a patient's cooperation is most important in psychological matters. I only wish to help, and I'll await your joint decision. " I left to write up my notes and await her decision.

Marcus came to visit me in the library, disturbed that he wasn't in control of his wife's situation. " At this moment Bethanie thinks she's Desiree' and you must leave it at that until I can work with her..also allow her some freedom as I'm sure she's disturbed about her memory loss as well as you are..I think she sees you as overbearing and giving no thought as to what she thinks or feels..give her some freedom..allow her to go into town with her cousin and do some shopping..maybe even spend some time in church..I'm told that Father Quimper is visiting and he's a close friend of mine..he can put in a good word for me and give her a push in the right direction. " She'll have to make a quick decision as I've received a telegram saying I'm needed in Fredericksburg by tomorrow evening. "

I knew that Desiree' would agree, but didn't mention that fact to Marcus.

After Desiree' left with Annelle, I noticed that Marcus had left also, but returned right before Desiree' and Annelle. When I talked with him he was all smiles..Desiree' has agreed to return with me to Fredericksburg, only if you agree to come with us.

" That's wonderful news, Count Marcus and of course I'll go with you to Fredericksburg, but first you must do something for me. " Marcus turned around and faced the medallion I held in my hand..tonight your wife will ask you to stay with her as her husband..it is your duty to feast upon her blood, and then you'll begin to know her deepest darkest secrets..you'll remember

that she's the one who turned you into what you're becoming and you'll begin to hate her with a passion you've never felt before in your life. "

I gave Desiree' a bit of private time, then went up to her room. " Good evening Mistress Canossa..your husband told me of your plans to leave in the morning and I'll gladly accompany you to Castle Desiree', but first I require a short private session with you this evening to learn a bit more about your memories. Please have a seat. " I pointed to a straightback wooden chair set near the wall and turned another one around so I could face her directly. I removed a black circular medallion with a glowing golden star situated in it's center, thankful that she didn't recognize it. " Do you know anything of hypnosis, Mistress Canossa? "

" I'm not familiar with that term. "

" It's a way of being able to take a person back into their mind's eye and retrieve lost memories. You'll tell me accounts of events and happenings and I'll relay them to you when you awaken from the hypnotic trance. Do you trust me to do that? "

" Yes, Dr. Franco. "

" Focus your eyes on the medallion's star and free your mind of all thoughts. " I'll only listen to the advice of Dr. Franco, Father Quimper, and Sheridan and Rochelle Canossa. Everyone else wishes to do me harm and I'll treat Marcus with respect, kindness and love that's his husbandly due. "

I had her repeat all my instructions just before a knock sounded at the door.

" Count Marcus..your wife and I just finished. " I turned back to Desiree'.
" Mistress Canossa, I'll treat you with a strict regimine of care and guidance, thus assuring the return of your physical health and mental well being. " I paused for a moment. " Count Marcus, it'd be in your wife's best interest for Father Quimper to come along with us as Desiree's spiritual confessor. " I kissed the back of her hand. " I'll see both of you in the early morning hours. "

Early Sunday morning, March 8th, 1877 I knocked on Desiree's door, and went in when I heard Count Marcus. I carried a tray with croissants, coffee,

and juice and handed Desiree' a large glass of fresh blood, flavored strawberries and cherries, meant to refresh and revive her.

" Count Marcus, the carriage awaits your presence. " I gave them some privacy so they could dress.

Johann and I shared a carriage on the way to Fredericksburg and compared notes as to what had been done and what we yet had to accomplish. I had encouraged Marcus to feed again on Desiree' while they were alone in their carriage, to keep her docile and compliant to his wishes. I knew he had done as asked when he had to carry Desiree' to their quarters because she was weak from bloodloss.

I saw her early next morning and gave her blooded nourishment, then Sheridan and Rochelle entered her room..she recognized neither one of them, which was a good sign that events were progressing as they should. They told Desiree' about Marcus's upcoming birthday party, one that we all would remember with joy and thanksgiving.

I left with Sheridan and her mother, so we could confer about the party's details, then I went back to check on Desiree'. " Are you feeling better, Desiree'? "

" Yes, Dr. Franco, all my aches and pains have gone away and I am bursting with energy. "

" After our session, we'll meet with Father Quimper..he's been visiting the priests in Fredericksburg and will return shortly. " I removed the same medallion from my coat pocket. " Please sit and let your mind float and drift into the center of the star. What did we discuss, Desiree'? "

" Memories of what happened before I reached the age of 10. But why talk of what I know, Doctor? "

" Although I have various reports of your family history from other sources such as your husband, Aunt, Uncle, and Cousin, I wanted you to fill in the blanks..this way your mind will grow accustomed to retrieving hidden memories from your last 3 years as well. "

After lunch, I walked her to where Johann waited, then left to speak to

Marcus through hypnosis. He was to wait until Desiree' knelt in prayer, then he was to feed on her..take her life force in anger and revenge, not sparing your hatred of what she turned you into. I knew that when she returned, she'd be weak again, so I sent more fresh blood for her to consume with the lunch Sheridan provided.

Later that evening, I went to see Desiree' for another session and she gave me all the letters that Phillipe Grenoble and she had written to each other, and it was icing on the cake. I took out my medallion and put her under hypnosis. I snapped my fingers, then asked,
" What do you see? "

" My husband Marcus, dancing with me..no, he's waltzing with my twin sister, Bethanie. "

" That's right, Desiree'. Marcus loved Bethanie with all his heart and soul, but she spurned his advances and ran off. Your father offered him a tremendous bribe to marry you in place of Bethanie so the family name would remain unbesmirched. "

" You mean my own father forced me into a loveless marriage? "

" Yes, Desiree', even though he and Marcus both knew you were in love with Phillipe. "

I knew that would reinforce her hatred of Marcus, and I continued in that vein for the rest of our sessions. Johann and she made numerous trips to the sacristy, where Marcus fed on her anger and hatred, day after day and the thought that she'd turned him into a vampire fueled the fires of his own hatred of her.

The morning of the party finally arrived, and anticipation of what was to occur weighed heavy in the air. The same rites and rituals which had been followed in the King's royal ceremony involving Desiree' the first time were strictly followed.

Johann and I stood in the cavernous basement and waited for Sheridan, Rochelle, and their servants to bring Desiree' to Hella Dracon's black altar, cross of blood.

Her hands were lifted, then stretched out horizontally and held in place by Sheridan and Rochelle as Johann intertwined two pure gold snake charms on my upper arms. I was blessed to tie her wrists and ankles with strong golden cords so she had no means of escape. After the vestial virgins danced, then kissed her cheek, they left and Johann and I prostrated our bodies at her feet as we spoke in tones of reverence and awe. " Hella Dracon, Theophanic Goddess Of Blood, we can see how pleased you are at this feast presented in your honor. " Then we crawled away as the holy monks entered and drank their fill of innocent blood from the portaled gargoyles.

One last monk, dressed in pure red robes entered the room, then threw back his cowl and revealed the masked face of a hideous black snake with blood-encrusted fangs and piercing red eyes. He faced the crowd and they fell to their knees in worship, chanting..

" Blessed be the holy name of Blaec Toth Snaca, cruel and relentless in his bloodying ritual, personifying wicked darkness..he rules the forces of chaos and confusion. "

He brought his palm to rest on the medallion which clasped Desiree's robe together. He removed it, then pressed it to her lips as the robe billowed around her feet. "

That's when Marcus threw the papers aside, and screamed in agony as he remembered his part in the ceremony..tell us about what you did to Desiree', Marcus..only then can the real healing process begin.

My sleeve slid to the elbow, and I pushed the kalisari to Desiree's waist, freeing her breasts for everyone to see. He closed his eyes as he relived the nightmare." Imprint your souls with the beauty of her skin and inhale the blessed scent of precious almond offerings. Know that she is truly the sacred vessel. This visage of Hella Dracon will soon flow with fresh sweet blood..the life force which nourishes and sustains us. Our benefactress will be honored with life everlasting for the gift she's provided. " I pointed to Sheridan.

I removed my mask and Desiree' saw my face damning her..I placed my hands on her breasts and sought her nipples, then bit down with a force so hard her blood flowed in gushing torrents and she screamed in terror as tears hotly streamed down her cheeks! " Tears and blood..the wisdom of the Goddess herself. "

Sheridan took her place by my side..Marcus cried in guilt and shame as he recounted the words she said to Desiree'.

" Dearest sister-in-law, Desiree', you never had the power you needed over me! I knew from the beginning that you weren't any good for Marcus..he's told me over and over again how much he hates you for destroying his life and happiness, but most of all the love he had with Bethanie! Marcus knows you've been impersonating her for quite some time and he gave you just enough rope to hang yourself! " She smirked. " Good grief, Desiree', you don't have a clue as to what you really are, but your sinful nature weighs heavy on the souls you've damaged. " She laughed hysterically and did a little jig.

" Straightout truth is you're a vampire, Desiree'..a consumer of innocent blood to feed your addictions to life and living. The drink that Dr. Franco provided for you was pure blood, guaranteed to keep you healthy..fattening of the sacrificial lamb for a special birthday gift, so to speak. " Sheridan pointed to me. " Marcus has repaid you in tit-for-tat spades..everytime you consented to come here and speak with your God, Marcus has preyed on you and now he'll drain you dry, taking back the life force you stole without his permission. "

I sank my fangs into the tender flesh of her neck and the others left us alone. " Desiree', my Desiree'..God will be the only witness to your final destruction. " I said these words as I feasted on her until she was dead.

I held her limp and bloodless form in my arms. Tears fell fast and furious as I realized the finality of my actions. I was shocked when I gazed into Desiree's amulet, and didn't see my own countenance, but Desiree' staring back at me as my fangs dripped with her death's blood. I carried her lifeless body upstairs and laid it on the couch in front of her portrait as everyone gathered to look at my handiwork..I remeber being startled by a booming voice from above.." Yes, Desiree' is dead, but as I live and breathe, so shall her spirit remain alive inside her painting.

Sheridan spoke. " The Great Goddess Hella Dracon has made her ruling and we cannot argue with her wishes. "

" That wasn't the voice of Hella Dracon, but that of Kermes Twa, who brings about light from darkness, innocence from guilt, and life from death. " Desiree' breathed a prayer of thanks that the true Great Goddess had saved

her soul.

He was more than horrified as he remembered he still had Sheridan's scarf in his possession, and that he'd used it on Nancy when they made love..that's when he knew that Sheridan would stop at nothing to kill anyone who got in the way of her being with Marcus.

" Marcus left and I have no ideas as to where he is or what he's doing now, but for a fact, anyone who was at that ceremony was killed, so there would be no witnesses for Marcus to question.. " Valera sighed. " It's almost midnight and you need to rest, Nancy. "

She left and Adrian and I were alone again. Too many unanswered questions reeled through my mind and I felt overwhelmed until Adrian offered his life force to me. The questions remained, but I felt his calm assurance flow throughout my system, and closed my eyes as he held me in his arms.

Chapter 32

A loud knocking came at the door. I glanced at my watch and saw the time..6am Friday morning! Adrian and I had fallen asleep in his mother's bed again. Jackson stood there with his arms on his hips. " Son, you seem to be monopolizing all of Nancy's time..now why don't you make yourself useful by chopping some wood for the fireplace..we're almost out! "

Adrian yawned and stretched, then kissed me on my cheek. " I'll be back in a while, but I'll only monopolize your time if you want me too, Nancy! "

I laughed. " That sounds good to me, Adrian. "

After Adrian left, Jackson closed the door and went to Lorraine's closet. " I have something I want you to see. " He brought out an ivory colored peasant dress with a rounded neckline, the bodice intricately embroidered with gold and orange butterflies..applied on the skirt was one magnificent red rose with a white butterfly resting on its petals. " Lorraine told me she had a vision concerning how her wedding gown should look..she found this in an old trunk that belonged to Angelo and wore it when we married. she said that butterflies are infused with planting the thoughts and ideas of the Great Gods, so that the universal plan can unfold itself upon the living to bring

about balance and harmony. As the butterfly lands upon the rose, she picks up pollen and deposits it on the next rose, and as such ensures that species survival. " He patted my pregnant belly.

" I want you to wear it when you marry Adrian tomorrow night. "

Desiree' drew in her breath. " Nancy, do you know what this reminds me of? " With Desiree' there was no telling, so I rolled my inner eyes. " This is the same outfit Natalia gave me to wear when I went with her and Marcus to Turlough.."

I interrupted her stream of thought. " Let me try it on and see if it fits or needs adjustments. " I went into the bathroom..how do you know it's the same dress, Desiree'? "

" Look underneath the skirt hem and you'll see that Natalia embroidered my initials in red thread. "

I turned it inside out saw DRT..Desiree' Rose Terrance and wondered how Angelo had come into possession of it, but didn't have time to think as I slipped it over my head and it molded itself to my body.

I came out and saw tears form in Jackson's eyes. " I can see why Adrian fell in love with you, Nancy. "

A soft tapping came at the door. Jackson cracked it open and admitted Angelo, who beamed, then gave me a big hug. Jackson said, " I'm going to check on Adrian and make sure he stays outside till you have time to change. " He kissed my cheek and left me alone with Angelo.

He spoke to Desiree'. " I remember the first time you told me you knew my great, great grandmother, Natalia, and I didn't believe you until I found her belongings amongst other things that had been bequeathed to me at her home near Turlough..everything you ever told me was confirmed in her papers. "

" Each time I've come back you've protected me, just like she did, Angelo. " She gave him a peck on the cheek and we went to change, before Adrian saw what was happening.

I carefully removed the dress and hung it up in the back of Lorraine's closet,

just before Adrian came through the door with a breakfast tray, his hair still slightly damp from a quick shower. " Valera says for you to eat everything on your plate, Nancy..you've got to keep your strength up. "

" Adrian, where's Valera? " I really wanted to know where Dr. Franco was, as I didn't want to be questioned by her as Desiree' flooded me with her memories of Turlough.

" She, Dr. Franco, Judge Arnold and my father went into town for supplies..I have a feeling my father wants to give me a welcome home party. " He laughed and I joined him, knowing that it would be more than a just a welcome home party.

" Angelo? " He nodded as if expecting my next words. " Tell me what you know about Adrian's mother, and how you and Desiree' met. "

I grew up near Turlough..it was famous for its horsefair and Flamenco dancers. I didn't care for horses, but was always interested in antiques..there were many too collect, but it was a hard sell in my own little corner of the world, so I made the move to America and settled in Springfield..it was a sleepy town with not much in the way of entertainment, but one weekend posters were put up all over, telling of gypsy entertainment featuring authentic Flamenco dancers from Turlough and I knew I must attend. Lorraine's parents were naturals and I introduced myself to them after the program..we had much in common and became fast friends. One day they came to me, their hearts filled with fear. Lorraine's mother was pregnant, and tests had confirmed she was to have a girl..that was unacceptable for certain reasons she said and she and her husband wanted to make a new start, but couldn't do it without changing their identities, and leaving their families without prior notice. I told them they could stay at my house and because of my business, I knew a man who could forge papers..the next day everything was set in motion, the work done and they left for Montana. A few months later I received an invitation to a baptism of sorts..although Lorraine's parents had left their colony, old country customs die hard. They wanted me to be a godfather to their baby, but I'd have to promise not to breathe a word of what they told me..I learned of their vampire covenant and how their daughter would always have need of fresh blood throughout all her life. I spent time traveling between Springfield and Montana and was happy when I learned that Lorraine was to be married to Jackson..I had studied many various religions, and there were 2 that appealed to me..one of

a universal God of love and light, and one of Kermes Twa, who is known by many names, Goddess of Nature and Balance. With Jackson having to be gone many times, Lorraine and I would discuss many topics..she introduced me to various gypsy customs and I introduced her to Kermes Twa, right before she became pregnant with Adrian..during that time, Lorraine's parents lived nearby, and I thought all was well and good with Lorraine's pregnancy. When she called and told that they'd gone off for a few days and never returned, she'd already been without much needed nutrients, and by the time I arrived to help her, the blood she drank was far too little, too late. " There were tears in his eyes as he said, " I was the one who delivered you, right before Jackson came home. Lorraine died soon after she gave birth to you, Adrian. " I held Adrian close to my beating heart as thoughts of Marcus immediately flooded my mind and I thought of how his mother had died when she'd given birth to him. " Your mother was very special, Adrian, and that's why she wanted you to know about your ancestors, and I can see that Kermes Twa was right in bring Nancy and Desiree' into your life in order to show you that love can encompass all, through the sharing of past, present and future. Everyone and everything in the universe is interrelated in one way or another. " I was a definite believer in that one statement.

" I'm sure my life would've been different if my mother had lived..who's to say we would've met, Nancy. "

" The same holds true for me, Adrian.." I thought of Marcus, Desiree', Bethanie and myself..the one person we all had in common was Sheridan..I wondered how she fit into Adrian's life.

Desiree' said, " I know the answer to that one, Nancy, but I'm hoping Angelo will tell the tale. "

" Now on to how Desiree' and I met..my parents died soon after I moved away from the old country and I was left in charge of my younger sister, Norah. She was a true beauty in every way and very trusting of people she encountered, but not being accustomed to the ways of the world, she became a victim of a certain older man named Wilhem who promised her everything her heart desired..she left with him and although I sent out detectives to search after the police couldn't find her, not a trace of her was ever found. I concentrated all my time with my business of antiques and collectables, never thinking I'd see Norah again, but one day a good friend of mine named Hugo phoned me from New York, and said he was on his way to Springfield

to see me. said while on his trips to Egypt he was only one of a select few who received an invitation from an unscrupulous trader who raided tombs and sold ancient artifacts to the highest bidder. He was picked up from his hotel and driven far into the desert night. Besides selling artifacts, this man also dealt in illegal female slavery. The trader always brought women to sell along with everything else and Hugo said he'd seen my sister there with the other slaves, and although she was older, physically she seemed none the worse for wear. Hugo offered to buy her after all the other trades were done..as soon as they returned to his hotel and he packed up, Hugo left Egypt with her aboard his private jet. It was 10pm when I met them at the airport..Norah was still beautiful, but in a different way, colder than ice when I kissed her cheek, with a hard edge to her voice and mannerisms..I asked if she remembered me and she said yes, but she had business to attend to in Springfield and would return to my house when she was through. Hugo and I were both shocked and waited all night for her return..it was almost dawn and when she came through the front door, she was covered in blood, smiling and praising Kermes Twa that she was alive and had been victorious in doing the Great Goddess's will. She wouldn't change her clothes, but fell into a trancelike sleep..this went on for two weeks, sleeping in the daytime and prowling at night, coming home covered in blood..each morning the local paper would describe how one or another evil doer had been slayed and I wondered if Norah had anything to do with with their deaths. I was at my wits' end, trying to figure out why she was acting as she was..one evening Norah said was staying home as she was expecting company..I didn't know what to think of that statement or who'd be dropping by, so I stayed with her. The doorbell rang and she said, ' Why don't you answer it, Angelo? ' I did, and there stood a tall elegant lady and a gentleman with a shock of white hair. The lady introduced herself as Valera Jessamine and her driver, Gustav. She said she knew that Desiree' was living with me and wanted to speak to her. I was about to slam the door in her face when Norah ran into her waiting arms..they cried and hugged as if they'd been missing each other for years. I was bewildered. Valera and Gustav breezed right on in as if they had visited many times before. Valera said, ' I take it that Desiree' hasn't explained any details about her life or how she came to reside in Norah's body? ' Of course I shook my head, no. Norah took my hand and said, ' Angelo, I have a date with Wilhem tonight..would you like to come along and learn what happened to your sister? You'll hear the truth firsthand from from his own lips and then see how she'll be avenged with the help of the Goddess I worship. ' She looked at her watch. ' It's time to go. ' I was scared, but wanted closure, no matter how it came about. Gustav was behind the wheel

and Valera sat in front with him, while Norah and I sat in the back. I held her hands in mine, and right before my eyes, Norah underwent a metamorphosis, changing from a dark-haired beauty into a young, blue-eyed innocent blond of 16 or so. My heart raced and I thought for sure I was hallucinating, but a voice from overhead said, ' There's no need for you to worry, Angelo. I am Kermes Twa, Great Goddess of Balance and tonight Wilhem will have his just reward meted out in fine fashion, and your life will change as I see fit. ' We arrived at a secluded spot and Norah told me to wait in the tree shadows. It wasn't long before I saw headlights coming from the opposite direction and a familiar face emerged from the driver's side of Wilhem's expensive car. Norah ran to him, and it was all Gustav could do to restrain me. ' Watch and learn. '

Norah and Wilhem talked for a while, then sat in his car..a few minutes later, Norah came out and motioned to Gustav. He came back towards us, carrying the limp form of Wilhem. He was unceremoniously dumped in to the small cramped trunk..we got back into the car and drove back to my residence..there was no gentleness where Wilhem was concerned. His hands and feet were tied and a gag was placed in his mouth so there'd be no screams heard. By the time we returned Norah had reverted to her old appearance. He didn't seem to be waking soon, so Norah began nuzzling, then rubbing his neck until his jugular vein stood out..her eyes glazed over and Valera told her to have patience..'if he's dead, how can the truth be heard and known? ' Norah said, ' Gustav, bring me some ice water. ' He did and she splashed Wilhem's face..he woke up and he struggled to free himself from his bonds to no avail. Norah ripped the tape off his mouth..' Well, Wilhem, who has the upper hand now? ' He sat there stupified as if Norah was a ghost from the great beyond. ' Certainly you remember me..little frightened Norah, all innocence and smiles for you. Do you remember what you did?' Valera handed her a needle and his face turned to ash..' I see you do remember..Valera's drawn a sample of blood from my body and determined that the heroin you injected me with was very high quality, leaving me without an ounce of resistance to you whims and wishes..I would have done anything for you, just in order to get more and more. " She turned her face away from him and fell to her knees.

" Great Goddess Kermes Twa,
Keeper of Darkness and Light
Judge between my innocence and his evil
Let the words from his lips be a testament against him "

Valera brought in a small plastic bag filled with a brown powder, and I made no assumptions about what it was as she put it under Wilhem's nose. " Do you know what this is? " she asked as he was forced to take a big whiff. He began whimpering and cowering, pleading for mercy. " Valera took some of the powder and added it to a small vial of crystal clear water, then drew it up into a syringe.

" Unless you tell us what you did to Norah..the truth and nothing but the truth, I'll inject this full strength liquid into your veins and you'll suffer the consequences. "

He began babbling about how the god he worshipped had told him he must take the innocence of a young girl, to futher his powers on this earth..and Norah was so sweet and unwise in the ways of the world that it was like taking candy from a baby. To watch her sleep brought joy into my heart, but Blaec Toth Snaca demanded that her joy and love be given to him, so I turned Norah into a junkie..she never knew what was happening until it was too late..after she was used up physically and mentally, no longer beautiful enough to bring in customers, I did the only thing I could and sold her into slavery. "

How I wanted to wrap my hands around his scrawny neck and kill him myself, but Norah said, " Angelo, his fate is not in your hands. " She nodded to Gustav who picked him up and took him to the cellar. Before the door was closed, she said.."Here's the god you worship..see if he'll take care of you! " I watched in horror as he was quickly enveloped, then devoured by a black-headed python. All the life seemed to go out of Norah and she barely made it to the kitchen table..Valera gave her a small cup of tea she'd made with the brown powder that Wilhem had been so afraid of..Gustav took her sleeping form to her room and laid her on the bed..I knew she'd soon leave this world. " Angelo, I love you, " She whispered and right before her spirit left, Desiree' said, " I'll see you again, Angelo. Gustav said, " We must bury her before the full moon rises. As we lowered her into the garden grave, Valera scattered basil sprigs over her body.. The superstition goes that the basil leaves will ensure safe passage to the next world for the innocent..I know what you're thinking, Angelo, that what I had in the bag was pure heroin, but it was just ground basil sprigs and leaves..heathen worshippers believe that if basil is injected or injected into the bloodstream, scorpions will nest in the brain..they believe that evil is good, and good, evil. " Gustav and Valera left after Norah was buried, and I closed shop and moved to Montana to ease the pain in my heart and soul. "

" Angelo was a wonderful friend to me and my father..we hunted and fished and learned much about nature together..Angelo went back to Springfield and his business, and I began writing music again..I sent Angelo some demo tapes and he managed to get me and my fledgling band a gig at Precious Metals. That's when my father told me I'd inherited White Wolf Lodge from my mother and I made that into my own home away from home.." Then he became somber. " I was young and impressionable, not too wise in the ways of the world, myself. I met the girl I told you about. " He didn't mention names. " She was a light in my darkness, the love I thought would last for eternity, but when she told me she never loved me, that was the darkest part of my life..I didn't see any reason to live.." I held him close as he went on. " I decided to end all the pain and suffering I felt and had readied everything for my departure into the next world, but fell asleep instead. That's when you and Desiree' came to me in my dreams, telling me that my greatest desires would come to fruition if I held on to life and living for just one more day..the dreams were so realistic, so filled with wonder for what the coming day would hold, that soon all thoughts of suicide were banished and I concentrated on my music to get me through the days and my dreams of you to get me through the night. I never had any doubts that you would come, and now that you're here I don't intend to let anything bad happen to you or our baby. "

Just then, Jackson burst into the room..it's a damn good thing all of you came out here or you'd be toast! " He handed Adrian the local newspaper from Springfield and the headlines read..' Mysterious fires ravage 4 separate places..serial arsonist suspected. At the stroke of midnight, 4 fire alarms went off..firefighters rushed to each scene, but in the short time it took for them to arrive, nothing was left except for ashes. On going investigations are taking place at..Adrian pointed at the addresses and I drew in a sharp breath..my condo, Angelo's Classiques, the Precious Metals Bar, and last but not least, White Wolf Lodge were no more.

" Seems as if someone's out for blood, Nancy! " Desiree' laughed. " Kermes Twa says we'll be safe here for a while, but true safety lies close within the enemy's camp. " I took that to mean that Marcus was playing the devil's advocate for a fool, but I didn't know where that left me or Desiree' in his plans.

" There's no more left for us in Springfield, Nancy. " Adrian was right and

the further I was away from Marcus, the less I'd be thinking of him.

I heard a tittering in my head.. " That's easier said than done. " Desiree' knew me so well.

Too many emotions and feelings coursed throughout my system and I fainted..when I woke up, it was early Saturday morning and Dr. Franco stood by my bed, taking my pulse. " How are you feeling, Nancy? "

I tried to sit up, but felt weak and woozy.." Your bloodcount is very low..I hope you're not thinking of going through with the wedding to Adrian..you're in need of bedrest right now..your system has had too many shocks in a relatively short period. "

" I have to, Doctor Franco. "

" I have some added news, then that might make you change your mind. I examined you and you're going to have twins..furthermore, Marcus is the father of one baby. "

" I can't go back to Springfield and confront him with that detail, Doctor..I'm afraid he'd want to separate the twins and I know in my heart that Adrian would never let that happen. "

Valera came in, bringing me a huge glass of liquid nourishment. It wasn't Adrian's blood, but left a familiar lingering after-taste. " It is the wild pansy..its common name is heartsease and this particular flower is reputed to alleviate the pain of separating from a loved one. " Desiree' had all the answers to questions I wouldn't ask.

A tentative knock came at the door and Adrian poked his head in, followed by Angelo and Jackson.

" How's the most beautiful woman in the world? "

" She's in need of bedrest..peace, quiet, and no excitement whatsoever..that is if you want her to have a healthy baby. "

Adrian came and sat beside me. " Can I speak to Jackson alone..and then I want to speak to you, Adrian. " After everyone left, Jackson looked worried. " Dr. Franco is right about me needing bedrest, but I still want to marry

Adrian..how soon can Judge Arnold be here? "

" An hour or two at the most? "

" As soon as he gets here I want him to marry Adrian and me.."

" I'll go and call him right now. " I had just enough time to gather my wits before Adrian entered the room..he smiled, then pulled up a chair and sat directly across from me.

" I want to give you a birthday present..gave him the Herkimer diamond ring and tears formed in his eyes as I said, " Adrian I'm consenting to wear your ring..I want to marry you today. " He was going to talk, but I put my finger to his lips. " I need to tell you something first before you say yes or no. " I conveyed what Dr. Franco had said about my having twins and Marcus being a father also and he nodded in understanding. " Are you still willing to make me your wife? "

He kissed me soundly and shouted for all the world to hear.." Yes, I'll marry you, and be a father to both your babies. " I knew there'd be no turning back now. He rushed out to talk to Jackson, and although the gathering for our wedding would be small, we'd have everything we needed, including undisputed witnesses.

While Adrian, Jackson and Angelo readied themselves for our ceremony, Valera came to me. " Nancy, you've chosen well and wisely, for Adrian is your only protection now. Before you say your vows, you must cleanse your heart and soul, and offer homage to Kermes Twa and Aquaelis for your good fortune and the balance of love that you and Adrian share. Place your hands over Desiree's necklace and feel the thread of hate that runs so deep, but the thread of love that runs much deeper, intertwined with lives past, lives present, and lives future. Let the words come in all their glory.

' Great Goddess Kermes Twa and Aquealis, God of Balance
thank you for double blessings
that of day and night, darkness and light
the twinship of heartbeats between husband and wife
and mother and babies'

In the palms of my hands I held 2 separate heartbeats, one for each baby that

slowly merged back into one steady heartbeat. " Judge Arnold will be here soon and you need to dress. " Valera went to the closet and came back with Lorraine's gown. She helped me put it on, then presented me with the jewelry that Phillipe had given to Bethanie, and that had finally passed into Adrian's hands. On my head she pinned a wreath of thornless wild red roses intertwined with dark green leaves. " The roses signify how Adrian has always seen you..for him it was love at first sight and the leaves are what Adrian means to you, hope for the future. "

A knock sounded at the door. " Are you ready, Nancy? " Angelo opened the door and proffered his arm to me. Judge Arnold stood with his back to the fireplace, facing front. Jackson and Adrian were dressed in coats and ties and drew in their breaths as Angelo walked me towards them. The only person not smiling was Dr. Franco, but there was nothing she could do to stop me.

No one said a word as Angelo clasped Adrian's hands in mine. Adrian and I had written simple vows which we said together. " I take you into my heart and soul, unified in love and togetherness, until death parts us. "

Judge Arnold said, " By the laws of this state, I now pronounce you husband and wife. "

Adrian kissed me on the lips and, then Jackson and Angelo kissed my cheek. Valera hugged me, then Dr. Franco said, " I wish both you and Adrian much happiness..her comment seemed genuine and I thanked her. " You need to sit down and rest, Nancy. " As Jackson and Adrian brought food to me, they told me about each of the dishes. Jackson said that Lorraine's mother had cooked their wedding dinner and that was what he'd made, especially for Adrian and me.

Pirógo le strugurlása - Boiled flat noodles that had been boiled in honey-sweetened water and colored with saffron. The noodles were laid in an oblong dish and then thickly spread with a mixture of currants, raisins and cream cheese, then more noodles, more mixture, then finished with a layer of noodles.

Sármi - cabbage stuffed with ground beef and chopped ham with cooked rice, salt, black pepper and instead of jalapeños Jackson added Bell peppers, then they were simmered in tomato soup for an hour. Bokeli - Wheat bread made with soda but no yeast, with crumpled fried bacon stirred into the

dough before baking.

With our main meal we drank stong hot coffee, then dessert was served. Galúshki were small dumplings made from flour and water flavoured with sugar and almonds, then boiled in milk were a joy to my sweet tooth. Then came the piece de' resistance..Románo tcháyo - boiled tea that was served in fluted dessert glasses filled with mashed peaches, apricots and strawberries. Jackson had me hold a sugar cube between my teeth as I drank the tea, then proposed a wedding toast..may the gods of our ancestors shower you with life's blessings, turning all sorrows into lessons learned for the path ahead. "

As the dishes were cleared away, my eyes grew heavy and I yawned. " That's a signal for us to leave and give these young people some much needed privacy. " Jackson winked and everyone followed him out the front door. Dr. Franco spoke to Adrian in private for a moment then they all piled into Angelo's car and left.

" Dr. Franco says I'm to put you to bed right now, Nancy. " We laughed and walked to Lorraine's room. It was all I could do to keep my eyes open as Adrian helped me undress and slip into one of his shirts after removing all my jewelry, including Desiree's necklace. " I love you, my beautiful wife. " Adrian murmured sweet words against my hair as I fell into a deep sleep the moment my head hit the pillows. In my dreams were 2 glossy black crows, a partnership of balance and harmony in their quest to bond with each other. While they perched on a treelimb, the coyote walked beneath them, howling that truth dwells within the coyote's trickster medicine, the paradox of wise sage and foolish prankster. The teacher spirit, playful and mischievous, yet equally capable of contemplation and introspection. As the crows observed the coyote, a southwind rose, ruffling their own fine feathers. Night-time fell and the full moon's light shone on the coyote as she called to her family. The 2 crows conversed with each other. The first crow said, maybe she's rallying others for the hunt or to chase off intruders..the second crow said, maybe she's in search of a mate beside whom she will journey the rest of her life until she finds ultimate fulfillment on her pathway.

When I woke, Adrian's blue eyes watched me closely. " How are you feeling this morning, Mrs. Conner? " " Mrs. Connor..I like the sound of that, Adrian. " Then I told him about my dreams, and he offered his own explanation.

Crows are very social, seeking companionship and the interaction of others with compulsion, fearing to be alone with their own company. They need to discover and develop an inner self relationship, facing themselves in honesty and truth. As the crows observed the coyote, a southwind rose, ruffling their own fine feathers. The joy of warm discovery in this breeze carries the powers of childlike trust, faith, knowledge and understanding forged in the fires of Experience, Innocence and the ability to heal through the use of Herbs and Plants.

" Since your babies were conceived in late January or early February, then it's safe to say they'll most likely arrive in October..that month houses the crow birth totem, and the two crows are the twins you carry. Animal spirits travel with us on a daily basis, teaching us their lessons, and the coyote has chosen to travel with you..associating her spirit within you until your destiny is learned and the chosen path is shown to you. " He offered me his wrist and I fed greedily.

To travel life's path with Adrian meant wholeness and oneness.." Make love to me, Adrian..I want to be your wife in every way. " He drew in his breath and started the mating ritual.

" I've cleansed my heart, soul and body this morning, and I would ask you do the same..shower while I make our room presentable. "
I turned the hot water knob on, and stepped into the stream of water..

" Great Goddess Kermes Twa,
as I make myself ready to accept Adrian as my husband,
banish all my fears and frustrations,
bringing to light love eternal,
from my body, heart and soul
to return to him in full force. "

After I finished, I returned to Lorraine's room..Adrian had spread dried flowering broom on the floor and lit numerous red, white, and orange candles that spilled forth fragrances of roses, vanilla and honeysuckle. " This broom is used to bless weddings and the candles have their own specific attributes..the red imbues love, passion, sexuality, and spirituality..the orange brings prosperity, encouragement, abundance and justice, and the white showers us with purity, peace, and courage to face any and all obstacles. " He sat in the middle of the bed in a flowing white robe and I

joined him..we faced each other and he gathered my hands in his, and we synchronized our breathing. " The first magic of the marriage vows is to honor your partner, by embracing the inner lover which resides in their soul in order to establish a stronger connection of intimacy that leads to identity. He removed his robe, then uncrossed my legs and smoothed them with his hands.." Let your legs always close any distance we've put between us, physically, mentally or spiritually. " I sat on his lap as he used his robe like a rope, bringing it around my back, then wound it behind his back and tied it, bringing us closer together in the bonds of love. His hands traveled up and down my back, bring shivers of delight to my senses. " Never turn your back on the man who loves you with all his heart and soul. " He placed his hand on my heart and mine on his..The union of our hearts will withstand the turmoil of this life, strengthening us each and every day. " He carressed my face with his gentle hands, then my lips with his own as he kissed me long and deep.." May each word that passes your lips be filled with the taste and thought of me, my love. " Then he kissed me again to seal his love.

I placed his hands upon my breasts, and felt my nipples harden.." May my breasts always nourish and sustain you, bringing you comfort from the harshness of a cruel and unfeeling world. " His lips were warm and soft as he began sucking on them and suddenly the hardness of his manhood was deep inside my body..we rocked back and forth in gentle urgency..I savored new thoughts and emotions that had lain dormant inside of me, a summer butterfly emerging from a dark cocoon. We held each other tightly in the afterglow of making love.

At first I thought it was just the wind blowing down the chimney, but soon the words became clear.. " You can't delay going home any longer. " The Great Goddess spoke, leaving no doubt in my mind that home meant DuMond House. Her last word shocked me into action. " There is danger if you remain here any longer. "

" Adrian, we have to go, now..before something happens. " We packed in haste..Adrian remebered his mother's papers and paintings and my trunk, then we got into his Ford xlt. As soon as Jackson's cabin was out of sight, Adrian asked me what was wrong..his question was answered when we heard a big boom and a great ball of fire coming from where the cabin had stood.

" We'll leave for France tonight. " Adrian withdrew two firstclass airline

tickets from his pocket as I removed my cellphone and called Angelo to fill him in.

Chapter 33

We went to Angelo's townhouse and they were gathered around the tv, watching the morning news. The newsanchor was showing pictures of a black hole where Jackson's cabin used to be. Police and firemen milled about.." City detectives and forest rangers are looking for clues as to what happened here just a few short hours ago. "

" Thank god you 2 are all right.." Valera hugged us first and was followed by Jackson, Angelo and Dr. Franco. " None of us should be here when the questions start. "

" Adrian and I are leaving for France on the next flight out of here..the only place any of us will be safe is at DuMond House. "

Angelo, Valera and Dr. Franco followed Adrian, Jackson and me to the airport, where tickets were waiting to be picked up. Our flight was called a short time later and we entered the dark interior of the airplane. Dr. Franco took the seat beside me. She held my wrist and took my pulse. " This is not a good sign, Nancy..unless you take time to rest your body and soul, the lives of your babies will be in jeopardy. "

Valera handed me another small vial of fresh violet juice as Adrian took the seat beside me. He held my hand, then kissed my cheek.." I love you, Mrs. Connor. " I laid my head on his shoulder and slept till the plane touched down. We passed through customs with no trouble, and Angelo hailed a taxi, giving the driver the DuMond House address.

Traffic was heavy until we reached the suburbs. " Does anything look familiar to you, Valera? "

Desiree' was all eyes as she took in the sights.

" Not really Desiree', but you can't expect things to remain the same after so many years. "

The driver turned his right blinker on and turned into a long curving driveway lined with weeping redwoods and soon he pulled up in front of a

grey stoneworked house. " Now this, I remember."

Desiree's joy was contagious as she ushered us into the foyer, which also served as a cloak and boot room. I flipped a wall switch to give us some light, but there was no electricity forthcoming. I figured there were no phones in service either. I turned around, but the cabbie had left our bags on the front step and a trail of dust in his wake. There were pegs across both walls and recessed areas for muddy, wet shoes. A grand staircase rose to our right, but Desiree' opened double doors to the left. " This was Uncle Joshua's haven from the world at large. There were authentic ship lanterns..there was oil in them and Adrian lit the wicks and the flooring warmly glowed in geometric-patterned parquet. A wooden wall railing was midway between the ceiling and floor..the bottom half was wallpapered in wide segments of slate blue, contrasting with smaller stripings of bright red and white. The top portion was clean white, setting off the many pictures and portraits adorning it. All eyes focused on an oil painting prominently displayed above the fireplace. Desiree' sighed in contentment as she waved her hand and said, " This clippership is Goddess Of The Sea.

Surrounding the square cherrywood table were cloth-covered cushioned chairs that matched the slate blue of the walls, their curved legs inlaid with ebonized dolphin designs.

The room was large enough to house a spectacular grand piano..the rosewood gleamed and shone in polished splendor and Desiree' and Bethanie were both amazed when Adrian played one of their mother's favorite songs by W. W. Balfe.. the words to ' Then You'll Remember Me ' seemed fitting for both our lives..

' When other lips and other hearts
Their tales of love shall tell,
In language whose excess imparts
The power they feel so well.
There may, perhaps, in such a scene
Some recollection be,
Of days that have as happy been,
And you'll remember me. '

If you wish to rest, your room is upstairs, the 3rd door on the left.

Annelle opened the door and I would swear before a judge and jury that a

lovely French garden greeted me..it was an exact replica of my bedroom in Springfield. Climbing red roses on a creamy white trellis papered the walls and stretched across the ceiling, giving the appearance of a rose arbor in full bloom. The floor was highly polished oak, the color of freshly turned earth, and the bedside area rug matched the bedspread and window curtains of periwinkle blue, reminding me of the sky on a clear day. In the corner was a mirrored cherrywood armoire to hold all my dresses, stenciled with butterflies of gold, orange, and red. The small writing desk that I used for my studies.

outside scenery. There were weeping redwoods, yellow poplars, cedars, and oak trees in abundance that lent shade to green manicured lawns, while boxwood hedges separated many smaller areas of graceful garden flowers. Off in the distance was an enormous clear paned greenhouse..My eyes widened on a central focal point of two intertwining rows of brilliant red roses and pure white lilies shaped into hearts..situated in the exact middle, light reflected in bright glitters as water plumed into the air, then cascaded from a 3-tiered fountain.

We strolled on the main path under the weak winter's sun, underneath bare tree branches until we came to the greenhouse entrance. Adrian opened the door and I was immediately reminded of my first walk with Marcus. The heady scent of roses and lilies filled my nostrils as Desiree' chose a walkway that meandered towards the middle of the garden. We walked across an arched wooden bridge situated above a small babbling brook which flowed through the estate and passed benches where one could sit and contemplate in quiet solitude. Here and there we stopped to stare at statues of whimsical animals and dour frowning dieties. The 3-tiered fountain loomed in majestic proportions and the cooling liquid sprinkled us in spattering gaiety. Adrian kissed me. " I love you, Adrian, " but deep within the secret reaches of my heart and soul I whispered, " I love you, Marcus. "

Adrian and I made love that night, but the next morning I began spotting, and Dr. Franco came to our room and examined me. " You've been under a great deal of mental and physical stress recently and my orders to you are complete bedrest for at least 5 weeks and then I'll decide if you can be up and about. "

Bethanie said whatever you need to do to keep our babies healthy and

Desiree' didn't mind in the least as she regaled us with stories of her life at DuMond House. Adrian and I spent time bonding as man and wife, but on Saturday, March 28th, things began to change. Spring came early and Adrian, Valera, and Dr. Franco developed cabin fever and took a trip into town..Adrian for music and art supplies, Valera for medicinal herbs, and Dr. Franco to see some medical experts in the pregnancy field.

I had the house to myself and was on the verge of sneaking downstairs when I heard a knock at the door..I assumed it was Valera or Dr. Franco so I said, " It's unlocked. "

The door opened and there stood Marcus, a bemused grin on his face as he closed and locked the door. " Now that we have some privacy.." He gave me a folder containing a sheaf of legal papers. " Look at our signatures, signed in blood. " It was a marriage certificate dated the night I had first been intimate with Marcus and the only name I recognized besides Marcus's and mine was that of one Dr. Marion Franco. " Your virginity and love are priceless jewels in my eyes, and could only be given within the bonds of holy matrimony. " Before I could protest, his lips captured mine, and although I wanted to resist, it was futile as my love for him came to the forefront. Then he presented me with my marriage certificate to Adrian. " Your complete pleasure belongs exclusively to me, not to any other man. " He struck a match, and I watched as flames engulfed the life I thought I had with Adrian. " It's almost time for us to leave. "

As if on cue, Dr. Franco breezed through the door. " I told you it was a mistake to rush into marriage with Adrian. " She examined me. " Both you and your babies are doing well, and I foresee no problems to short distance travel. "

Desiree' was all smiles, while I felt confused and torn. That's when Dr. Franco took the opportunity to stick my arm with a needle, and I drifted off to sleep. I woke up in a room with no windows to the outside world, and no idea as to where I was. " Take a deep breath, Nancy, and tell me what you smell. "

I inhaled and the essence of ripe purple fruit came to mind. " Grapes? "

" Not just grapes, you ninny, but the aroma of wine in the making. " Desiree' did a little jig. " I think we're at Turlough. " To my amazement, our door

wasn't locked and we walked into a cavernous room.." Let me get my bearings. " Desiree' turned to her left and we walked between two rows of wooden wine casks to a massive oak door. We pushed on it and it swung inward with no sound.

" Natalia often mentioned the infamous Turlough Chapel, but told me never to enter. " The stoneworked walls shimmered with an eerie glow. I brushed away cobwebs from my face and hair as I looked at two rows of hardwood pews. On the wobbly altar lay 2 slim black leather-bound books tied together with red ribbons. There was no lettering on the outside, and as I reached out and touched them, the old saying, 'Curiosity killed the cat' immediately came to mind. Desiree' and Bethanie put their heads together and giggled like schoolgirls playing hooky. I felt their excitement envelope me and I slipped the books into my pocket for safekeeping, paying scant attention the warning sign.

" We need to get back to our room before anyone notices we're gone. " I slipped back into bed, and untied the book ribbons..a piece of parchment paper fell out and I read the words..Once the gates of hell have been opened, they cannot be closed by any means, other than by the greatest sacrifice of all.

I fell into a deep sleep and woke up to find myself back in bed, with an IV drip in my arm once again. The distinct smell of fermenting grapes reached my nostrils and I waited for Desiree' to make her presence known, but she was nowhere to be found. Dr. Franco took my pulse and smiled. " You, Desiree' and Bethanie must gather strength and courage to fight the final battle; then and only then will the curse be broken. "

I had no idea what she was talking about, but was more than scared. " Breathe deeply and relax. " Dr. Franco removed the black obsidian amulet from my right wrist as Valera walked in.

" Where is Marcus? " I had no idea if he knew what was going on.

" He's protecting you from harm as we speak. "

" And Adrian? "

" I'm not at liberty to say. " Valera held my hand. " Nancy, I want you to consent to being hypnotized by Dr. Franco. " Desiree' wasn't thrilled with

that request, but couldn't protest or move as the good doctor adjusted my drip. I felt free and receptive to what Valera said. "As I've told you before, the Great Goddess uses obsidian for soul retrieval. I'll be right by your side and no harm will come to you, Bethanie, or Desiree'."

Dr. Franco said, "Look into the amulet." I did and all the people I knew and loved smiled at me. She turned it over and I saw my mother. "Concentrate on the love your mother had for you and let her spirit tell the story."

My old life faded from view and was replaced by an alternate reality.

DuMond house turned into an insane asylum.

My parents passed away when I was very young and although I had no money problems and lived in the house I inherited from them, I always felt alone and lonely, having been born under the DuMond Curse. It had begun with my great-great-great grandmother, Annelle Aleanse. Each generation was only granted one child, but the curse had worsened over the passing years to where that only child lost his or her parents by some mysterious accident before the child reached 2 years of age. DuMond House had its own little chapel; the main entrance had been built on the outside to accommodate those who were not family members.

All my life I had prayed to God, asking and begging him to remove the curse from my life. I trusted and believed in his goodness and mercy, and even thought that my prayers had been answered when I met Joseph Adams in January of 1976; he was a struggling street artist and I was a student at Nancy University. He and I were soul-mates and married in the early morning hours of March 21st, but when he went to bring the car around he never came back, and I knew the curse on my life continued in full force.

I felt that God had failed me once again so I went and knelt in front of the hardwood altar; I had just begun my prayers, offering homage to whichever god would answer my deepest longings and desires as a holy vision, an angel of mercy and redemption dressed in pure white flowing robes blazed into a divine light that reached into the unknown crevices of my being. "I am well pleased by the beauty of your innocence and now stake my claim on you as my chosen vessel."

I knew my curse was ended and I willingly gave my heart, soul, body and blood to him in that moment and he planted his holy seed inside my barren womb, which came to life. He said he wanted a token from me that said I belonged exclusively to him and I gave him a lilac/cream oval shaped quartz cameo ring in a goldtone setting on it that had been passed down from my mother and her mother. I drew in my breath. This belonged to your mother and I'm sure she'd want you to have it. I leaned close and saw the high relief. He turned it around so that only the gold band showed. was Annelle's profile relief. . " Sister, the beauty of your heart and soul can be seen in this piece of jewelry. "

" Yes, Desiree'; Reven gave this to me on our wedding day. I always wear it in his presence, but it travels with him on his sea journeys to remind him of the love we share. "

He vanished from sight and I saw a slim black leather-bound book tied together with red ribbons that he had placed on the altar.

The house was old and noises as it settled sometimes sounded like wavery whisperings from ancient ghosts. " Valera, that sounds like the same books I found. "

" They are, but we must be quiet and listen to the story as it unfolds. "

There was no lettering on the outside so I took a closer look at the dimpled grain. I slipped the book into my pocket for safekeeping, then heard a faint voice. " I am the goddess who has delivered you from your lifelong pain and torment; now is the perfect time to learn about my ways. Every second that you hesitate can bring on unforeseen and dangerous circumstances over which you have no control. Come peruse my hallowed words and innermost thoughts. "

Underneath the full yellow moon I made my way to the knot garden. Fireflies flickered through the budding trees near the back edge of the property, and a chant of some sort came wafting on the breeze. I walked quietly through the woods, following the sounds, and came upon a small secluded clearing in the midst of the oak trees, hidden from prying eyes. On the far side were holly bushes loaded with clusters of bright red berries that looked like drops of fresh oozing blood. I had a deep desire to turn tail and run, but felt hands on my shoulders. " Who invited you to our worship service? " Other voices echoed that sentiment as I was spun around. " Hold

out your hands! ” I did and he took the book. “ I see you’ve brought your invitation. ” The coven leader welcomed me with open arms. “ The Great Goddess only makes herself known to the chosen few. ” I was brought into their circle, then kissed in turn by each of the 13 members. The leader glanced in my direction and offered thanks. “ Hella Dracon, thank you for guiding and directing Lousanne DuMond Adams in you omnipotent ways; Just as our spring equinox ritual foretells of burgeoning life, we have been truly blessed by the Great Goddess. Lousanne, our newest member is with child and will be honored to read from 'The Laws Of True Worship'. He handed me the book I had found and instructed me to read from the first page.

“ As we lay the candles down one by one
The flames of love are sent to you
The darkness is our love for you
Their blending is our inspiration
The balance a continuation
A well of deepness our desire ”

While I read, the leader placed black pillared candles around the edge of a deep pool of cold well water and lit each of them. The candles flickered in the darkness and their leader gathered my hands in his; a dark shadow passed over me and blew out all the candles..

The coven fell to their knees in praise; I had never been a religious person, but found it easy to offer praise for becoming pregnant. “ Great Goddess, I don't know your thoughts or ways, but am truly thankful you have thought enough of me to grant my greatest wish. Show me the true path to your heart and love so that I may follow where you lead. Amen. ”

“ If she only knew the right path to take. ” Those words from a great distance hung over my head like a black cloud.

Everyone seemed pleased with my words, and the holy bonfire was lit. “ As the mystery of life unfolds, so will your plans for Mother and Babe. ” The leader held up his hand and took the book away from me. “ If you wish to learn more about our benevolent goddess, among other things, then come back to our worship services next week, but before then, learn to pray. ” He handed me a single page. “ Make use of your house chapel. ” I went home and slept like a new-born babe.

In the early morning hours, I went to the chapel and cleaned it thoroughly in order to prepare it for morning prayer.

‘ Contemplation and communication are essential in maintaining the relationship between the Goddess and her chosen ones.

On bended knee, utter these words;

Hella Dracon, Theophanic Goddess of Blood,

Your kingdom has come to earth in order that your words of knowledge and wisdom will make believers of all humanity

Thank you for giving me my daily bread that nurtures and sustains in every given situation

let my sinful nature praise you as you seek out those chosen spirits, hearts and souls which belong to you forever and ever.’

I heard gasps of dismay coming from the empty pews.

“ Nancy, wake up. ” Dr. Franco snapped her fingers, then handed me ‘The Laws Of True Worship’ to read from.

‘ Contemplation and communication are essential in maintaining the relationship between the Goddess and her chosen ones.

On bended knee, utter these words;

Hella Dracon, Theophanic Goddess of Blood,

the evilness of your kingdom has come to bring hell upon the earth for the unbelievers.

thank you for giving us our daily bread,

the sacrifice of innocent humanity

let our sinful natures praise you as we bring about

the trials and tribulations that you seek

our spirits, hearts and souls bleed for you from now until the end of time.

Tears stung Desiree’s eyes, as remembrances weighed heavy on her heart.

“ Evil comes in many ways, shapes and forms, and sometimes what we think are the greatest gifts in our lives, come with strings attached. ”

There were no words I could say that would explain my feelings about seeing my mother and how she’d offered praise and thanksgiving to Hella

Dracon and I remembered what Kermes Twa had said..my darkness evolving from the very essence of innocence..I shuddered as I realized that the goddess who'd brought pain, turmoil and death to Desiree' had in actuality given me life, but for what reason? So many implications to consider.

“ We cannot be judge and jury to what happened in your Mother's case until we know all the facts, Nancy. ”

“ The greatest sin of all is deceit, because it blinds us to truth that sets us free. ” The Great Goddess spoke, then I drifted away again.

I made sure I spent time in the chapel, offering prayers and oblations to the goddess with my own private ceremonies.

Each morning I prayed that Hella Dracon would guide and direct my life as she saw fit, watching and protecting me and baby..in return, I'd offer her my love and devotion and make sure my baby was dedicated to her and brought up in her ways. I returned to the coven that night, and was welcomed with open arms by each member.

The coven leader smiled as he patted my back. “ Lousanne, the Great Goddess says that only small portions are to be read in order for us to digest and understand her ways. ” He showed me the holy candles which were placed around the sacred well.

“ By your hand, light the way for our members. ”

When he opened the Book of True Worship, the coven spoke as one.

“ In newness are the candles lit
Your light we hold within our heart
Prayers are rising, hear our words
Your answers come from far and near
We heed your timely call ”

When they had finished praying, they kissed me on the cheek, then bowed low to their Leader, and parted company with us. “ Lousanne, the Great Goddess is well pleased with your prayers and oblations this week.

Continue, but also add this noontime prayer to Blaec Toth Snaca, the male god we worship in conjunction with Hella Dracon. ” He handed me another single sheet of paper. “ Come back in one week and bring something that you cherish with all your heart to be sacrificed to Hella Dracon, in order to show her your worthiness and devotion. ”

The next morning, I went to the chapel to pray and give thanks to Hella Dracon, then went to the store and purchased black candles with red holly dots encrusted on them to honor her and Blaec Toth Snaca as I prayed at noontime. I lit the candles, and as they flickered, I read the prayer.

Blaec Toth Snaca, God who stills the chaos
You turn the night-time shadows into morning’s precious light
assuring blessings for the pure of heart
showing mercy for the innocent and meek
Let your loving-kindness always rule the world

Peace-filled shadows lulled me into restful sleep.

I was awakened from a deep sleep of utter peace and contentment. “ Don’t let her fool you into thinking all’s right with the world she rules. Lies, upon lies, upon more lies is how she operates! Open the book and read the truth for yourself, Nancy. ” “ My Mother never would have consented to being a part of this if she’d known the truth. ”

“ But if she had known the truth, you wouldn’t exist, Nancy. Kermes Twa can turn the most evil deeds into blessings of good and light; Desiree’ and you are both proof of that. ” Valera’s hug warmed us, but we were chilled when Dr. Franco opened the Book of True Worship.

“ In oldness are the candles lit
Your darkness deep within our heart
Govern our prayers with your uprising hatred,
Your blood-filled answers come from far and near
Innocent of heart, your victims heed the timely call ”

Noontime Prayer

Blaec Toth Snaca, God of Utter Chaos,
you turn night-time shadows into mourning death
assaulting the pure of heart with black reproach
showing no mercy for the innocent or meek
let your desecrations and abominations always rule the world.' ”

Dr. Franco said, “ It’s time to give your body, mind, and spirit complete rest. ” She adjusted my IV and I wondered what my mother had taken to the coven to prove her worthiness and devotion to Hella Dracon.

A week had passed and the date was March 28th.
I slept for a couple of hours, and woke refreshed and feeling wonderful. The answer as to what I should bring to the coven to show my loyalty and devotion had come to me in a dream. I hurried up to my room and went to a small black box in the back of my closet. I opened it, then picked up the gold locket that had belonged to my mother. I’d put a new picture of my newborn baby and me in the empty space opposite.

The house settled as I got on my knees and prayed and I heard those ghostly voices whispering again. “ That’s the same locket that I had with me when I was found. ” I heard a tiny click and the rustle of paper against metal, then crying as if someone’s heart had been broken, never to be mended.

Soon the sounds faded and I dismissed them as I went downstairs and into the warmth of sunshine and cloudless blue sky, making my way towards the fountain and near the plots where the roses and lilies intertwined, I thought I saw an angel come down from heaven. In an airy voice she said, “ My name is Sheridan and I hope you don’t mind that I’ve come to pay you a visit..your grounds are so lovely and serene that I couldn’t resist. ”

I was glad to have someone my own age to talk to. She wiped her brow as the afternoon heat beat down on us. “ Would you care to come to my house and get a cool drink? ”

“ I don’t have any nearby friends and that would be wonderful. ” We sipped cold lemonade and she mentioned the fact that she’d just completed mid-wifery studies at Nancy University.

I smiled, knowing this was a good omen. “ My period is late by one week,

and I'm hoping I'm pregnant. ”

“ Would you like me to examine you? ” I didn't dare go into town to be examined because my doctor knew I'd never consummated my marriage vows with Joseph, and all sorts of questions would be asked that I wouldn't be able to answer to anyone's satisfaction.

“ Yes, Sheridan, that would be wonderful. ” She didn't need to know anything, except for the fact that I was married, but lost my husband due to unforeseen circumstances.

She examined me, then offered congratulations.

“ Expect a new addition to your family come late November or early December. ”

I was elated to know that my pregnancy had been confirmed. “ Would you consider being my live-in companion..a friend I can trust with my life and the life of my unborn child? ”

Sher smiled, then went and got her bags and I led her to her new living quarters. It was as if she had always been a part of my life.

Chapter 34

I woke up knowing that having Sher enter the picture would cause more than minor problems in my mother's life. Marcus entered my room, and when he kissed my forehead, I caught a disturbing glimpse of my father; whoever he was, he definitely wasn't the angel of light that my mother perceived him to be. “ Don't look so worried, My Love..I won't bite unless you give me permission. ” He laughed as Dr. Franco removed the iv from my arm. “ Get dressed, we're going to take a walk in the fresh air and sunshine. ”

He watched in wry amusement as Valera gave me an ivory satin gown to wear, but tears came to his eyes when he saw the roundness of my belly. I gave him free access to touch and feel and we were amazed at the first gentle stirrings of life within my womb. “ Marcus, I love you. ” The words escaped from my heart and soul and his eyes gleamed in cruel triumph.

“ There was never any doubt about that, My Dear..Adrian was just a passing phase, a sin that I’ve paid for in full. ” He held out his arms and I felt embraced in the strength of his love, as all thoughts except the present moment faded from view.

We walked arm in arm through the doorway that led to the outside world, but made an unscheduled stop inside the Turlough Chapel; it had been cleaned up, and readied for worship, but to which god and goddess I didn’t know. I shivered as Marcus handed me a veil of white Italian lace, then pointed towards the altar and the black-robed priest who stood there. “ Although these arrangements are simple, this time I want you to remember being married to me. ” He snickered. “ Honesty is the only policy we should have from now on. ”

“ Are you ready for the ceremony to begin, Count Marcus? ” The priest cleared his throat. “ Do you Count Marcus of Fredericksburg, take to wife, Nancy Adams, now and forever? ”

Marcus answered, “ I do. ”

The priest turned to me. “ Do you Nancy Adams take to husband, Count Marcus of Fredericksburg, now and forever? ”

I hesitated, but Marcus had his own specific plans to follow.

“ Answer the priest, Darling. ” He squeezed my arm.

I managed to say I do, and Marcus led me into bright sunlight that hurt with stinging pain. I realized we weren’t outside, but in another room with blazing fluorescent bulbs and the stinging pain was a needle piercing my skin. Marcus laid me on the hospital bed and my wrists and ankles were tied, so I couldn’t move or pull the iv drip out of my arm. Dr. Franco adjusted the medicine and I saw Sher enter the chapel, then the same angel of light that my mother had seen spoke to her. “ I forbid you to sacrifice the innocent blood of my chosen vessel or her baby. ” She seemed displeased. “ You will still have a major role in my life and that of the coven members, my adopted daughter. ” She left in a hurry of envious indignation and I finally knew why we were doomed.

Desiree’ and I began to scream and moan.

Friday arrived. Sher said she was going to town and get her other belongings to bring back to DuMond House. After she left, I went to the chapel to say morning prayers, shivering as a cold breeze brought screams and moans from the pews.

I left in haste and made my way past the knot gardens to the secluded area where the religious services would begin shortly. When the coven leader came into view I handed him the old pen, letter opener and inkwell my mother used to write her important messages, and a blank piece of clean stationary that Hella Dracon had specifically said I would need for the night's ceremony. The leader took the letter opener and made a small slit across my left wrist. "The blood of life flows and fills the empty well of Hella Dracon." He dipped the pen into my blood and handed me the sheet of stationary. "Write the words I speak. 'I, Lousanne Adams do dedicate and consecrate my firstborn child, the child of my womb and heart, to Hella Dracon, Great Goddess of life and living.'" When I finished, he burned the note, then mixed the ashes with the rest of my blood, and dabbed it on my forehead. "This is your promise that has been signed, sealed and delivered."

The leader spoke, "Such will be your life; long, happy and filled with joy, now that you've dedicated your unborn child to the service of Hella Dracon. Come back and worship with us when the summer solstice arrives..until then keep visiting the chapel and offering prayers and oblations to the Great Goddess and Blaec Toth Snaca." He handed me a sheaf of papers and said I was to follow the specific instructions and prayers on it until the summer solstice ceremony.

I went to Sher's bedroom to see if she had returned..there was a note attached to the door that said she'd be back before darkness set in. I opened the door to peek inside and noticed that she had just started a canvas in oils. There was a small slice of red moon and black scudding clouds. In the background were dark green trees...upon closer inspection I could see what appeared to be mountains in the distance. Sher came up behind me on silent feet, her face flushed and smiling. "What do you think?"

"It's beautiful, Sher. I didn't know you were an artist."

“ Only when the mood strikes me. ”

Sher spent much of her free time that spring in taking extra college courses and I was kept busy by my prayer sheet.

I made the first of many trips to town and stopped at a religious store which specialized in all manner of different styles and types of worship. I purchased a hooded green robe lined with red silk and a large container of purified snake ashes that had been mixed with burnt holly leaves and berries. I went back home and cleansed my body and heart, then applied a thin sheen of monkshood lotion on my skin. It wasn't long before I felt tingling sensations and knew the Goddess was pleased with my efforts. The ashes were rubbed on next and intensified what I already felt. I slipped on the robe and floated on air down the stairs to the chapel to offer praise and homage to Hella Dracon. The coven members met me there and I prayed;

Hella Dracon, as your servant, I bow humbly before you
wearing the green and red robes of your temple,
my face and hands covered in sacred ashes
the dust of my old life forgotten
my being writ with the signs of your ownership;
I belong to you, now and forever

The coven chanted, ‘Now and forever,
now and forever, now and forever she belongs to you’

It was hours later that I woke from a trance and found myself alone, except for the ghostly voices weeping and wailing from the back pews.

I woke with a start, my body and nerves tingling with dread and horror at what my mother had done when she was pregnant with me. “ Dr. Franco, monkshood is another word for aconite, isn't it? ” She nodded her head, yes. “ What effects would that lotion have on an unborn child? ”

Valera spoke up. “ In this diluted form, it makes the person more receptive and willing to believe falsely spoken words which are chanted for hours on end, and the added ash permeates, then seals what is said into the very heart and soul; the beginning of darkness evolving from the very essence of innocence that even now circulates within your own heart and soul..the

balance of the universe existing as one within your body. ” I was certain she spoke of the twins I carried.

The IV drip was adjusted and I drifted off.

I had slept the night away the night in the chapel and woke refreshed in spirit and mind. I took out my prayer sheet, then went to town. The owner of the religious shop didn't bat an eyelash when I told him what I was in need of.

In the chapel I laid a consecrated mantle, sewn from holy snake-skins on the altar, then placed fresh holly with deep red berry bunches on top of it. I lit 6 alternating candles of green and red, 12 in all along the altar's length, then placed a silver chalice of purified snake's blood on the raised pulpit. I dipped the one remaining holly branch into the blood and sprinkled myself with it;

Hella Dracon,
With my atoning sacrifice
you blot out the scarlet sins of my old life
and take away the sting of eternal death and damnation
allowing me the freedom to enter your holy kingdom
and live with you eternally

The pews were quiet for a change and I sat in solitary contemplation.

I stood in the dark shadows of the confessional booth and watched an unsettling scene unfold before my eyes, wanting to avert my heart and soul from what was going to happen. I tried to wake up from the unholy nightmare that was just beginning, but became more entrenched as my mother removed her clothing and stood in perfect nakedness before the angelic personage whose light filled the chapel, not a flaw or blemish on her body and it was no wonder that he couldn't resist her innocent beauty. He presented her with a white robe, lined in black silk. One member from the coven approached with a live lamb and handed my mother a pearl handled dagger; she plunged it straight into the poor lamb's heart and its blood spurted all over my mother's robe.

She read from the Laws Of True Worship.

“ ‘Come to me humbly, wearing the white and black robes of my temple,
splattered with holy blood
your faces writ with the signs of my ownership;
Sum fine which means I am the End.’ ”

Each coven member dipped their hands into the lamb’s blood and smeared their faces in red liquid, then chanted.

“ Hella Dracon and Blaec Toth Snaca
Grant the world your endless possibilities
No sanctuary, no peace, no prosperity, no law
No hope, no trust, no mercy, no love
Except that of bestowing upon you
Innocence in bloodbaths as is your due. ”

My mother and the angel in white finished the ceremony with these words.

“ Blaec Toth Snaca, God of Utter Chaos,
you turn the night shadows into mourning death
assaulting the pure of heart with black reproach
showing no mercy for the meek
let your desecrations and abominations always rule the world ”

As the coven members watched, the angel of light removed my mother’s blood-spattered robes; he dipped his hands into the lamb’s blood and smeared it all over my mother’s body, then proceeded to lick it all away..when he was finished he said, “ I have washed away the blood of your innocence and in its place have claimed you as my bride; my darkness and evil will be passed on to our baby. ”

Mercifully the vision faded away.

I felt fingertips caressing my face and lips in gentle persuasion that brought back long denied feelings to my heart, body, and soul. Icy hands smoothed my pregnant belly..“ Just as the life inside you grows by leaps and bounds

on a daily basis, so does my love for you increase. ”

I was in a goosedown bed inside a sunny room that smelled of lavender and lemon. “ My Darling, I know I promised you a walk in the sunshine and fresh air, but haven’t been able to deliver until now. ”

I was dressed in black stretch pants and a loose-fitting white peasant shirt. Marcus helped me sit up and slid soft kidskin shoes on my feet, then gave me his hands. We walked downstairs and outside to a beautiful day. I turned around and saw a cottage with dark green ivy covering its cobblestone walls. Surrounding the yard were stately cedar and cherry trees in full bloom and herb bushes growing in great abundance. I heard water babbling and walked past the side chimney towards the back of the dwelling; white graceful swans swam among the lily-pads and dusty blue hyacinths in the large flowing stream. Desiree’ shouted with joy. “ I know where we are, Nancy. This is where the Florenza family used to live. ”

“ You’re right, Desiree’..I’m hoping that pleasant memories will bring about peace and serenity for Nancy. ” He patted my belly. “ And our babies. ”

“ What’s today’s date, Marcus? ”

“ Saturday, June 20th. ” He spoke as if that was normal in every sense of the word, but what immediately came to my mind was the lull before the storm.

“ The last day I truly remember was when went to the Turlough chapel and said our wedding vows. ”

“ That was over 2 months ago, My Dear. ” Tears came to my eyes and Marcus kissed them away. “ Dr. Franco said it was for your own good, as you had started bleeding. We didn’t want anything to happen to the babies, and I suggested bringing you here to recuperate. ”

“ I don’t understand, Marcus. ”

“ This is all your doing..or rather your undoing of years of hard work. Come sit down and we’ll talk. ” We sat on the bank and dangled our feet in the cool water. “ The main reason I funded David Winslow’s Charity Ball was because Dr. Franco was going to head the lab and find a way to cure me of being a vampire, but when I saw you across the room, I knew I had found

my real cure and it didn't matter if I remained a vampire or not; all my years of hard work bottling up feelings and emotions melted away in the sunshine of your radiant smile. The intensity of my love for you overwhelmed me and when I tasted Adrian's blood in you, I was jealous of the way he made you feel so in order to get back at you I called Bethanie's spirit into your heart and soul..once that process started, there was nothing I could do to stop it. ” He sighed. “ Dr. Franco says it was part of the healing process that each of us had to deal with in order to accept ourselves for who and what we truly are. If Adrian and you had remained together he wouldn't be able to discover his real purpose for being put on this earth. ”

Which is? ”

“ Nancy, I'm not privy to what the Great Goddess has in mind for Adrian. ” He sounded exasperated and I found myself laughing. “What's so funny? ”

“ Now that sounds like something Desiree' would say to me. ”

“ I'm going to tell you a secret; Dr. Franco has developed a synthetic blood, which you've been given in order to keep you and our babies alive. ” He entwined his fingers with mine, then gazed into my eyes and touched my cheek. “ It's been a long time since I had you all to myself. ” His movements were languid, his hands and mouth not allowing me time to think, but to feel desire rising hot and heavy within my body. “ We've denied ourselves physical pleasure for way too long. ”

I didn't protest as he unbuttoned my blouse, then set his icy lips just above the 'M' on my breast. “ Yes, Marcus. ” He lowered his head and drank just a small portion of my synthetic blood.

“ Not a hint of anyone's life force but yours, My Dear. ” He gathered me into his arms and carried me upstairs to our room. He undressed my mind while his hands skimmed the surface of my skin, tantalizing and teasing, his words arousing me beyond anything I had ever felt before. “ You are my passion, my body and soul,
the love who will last a lifetime
the before and the after
through sadness and laughter
you are the one for whom my heart tolls. ”

“ Marcus, make love to me. ” He didn’t hesitate, but with unhurried preciseness kissed me long and deep, his tongue soft and warm, not demanding anything, but I gave all of my heart and soul to him in that one minute, knowing that I was the one he wanted, needed and loved. He removed my blouse, and drew in his breath as he gazed upon my heavy breasts through a sheer red bra, his thumbs circled my nipples and they stood at attention through the gauzy material. “ I can’t wait to taste them. ” He unclasped the hooks and set my breasts free. He cupped them in his palms and brought them to his open mouth, sucking and moving them back and forth with his tongue. “ Our babies will enjoy receiving nourishment from your body as much as I do. ” He removed my pants, moved his head to my rounded belly and gazed in fascination as he stroked and caressed, and whispered bonding words of love to me and our babies. When he removed my panties, tears fell from his eyes as his lips and tongue worshipped the nakedness of my womanhood. “ You are the only woman I’ll ever desire, from now until my dying day. ”

He moved off the bed, undressed himself, then sat in a chair across from me. “ Come to me, my Love. ” He lowered me onto his erect manhood and rocked us back and forth in gentle lovemaking and I was lulled into a false sense of security.

After Marcus and I ate supper, Valera came for a visit and took me aside. “ It’s close to the midnight hour and you and I have things to do. I told Marcus that we’re going for a walk, and would be back soon. ”

Valera led me to an isolated spot in the middle of the woods. In front of a well she had built a firepit circle, laid with logs ready to be lit. Around the well were candles. “ The red candles on the right signify ripeness and abundance and the white candles on the left signify the barrenness of the coming winter months.

In preparation she handed me a small pouch, then pointed to a bowl filled with lavender and chamomile. “ Let your sorrows and troubles mingle with the herbs, then place them within the pouch. ”

Valera began the summer solstice ceremonial rites with words of wisdom as she lit the holy bonfire..

“ Kermes Twa, Great Goddess of bright moonlight
You have bestowed on us, your true believers and children
All things good and merciful from your unlimited bounty..”

I threw my pouch into the roaring flames as the bonfire slowly died and only small embers remained.

“ Tonight as is your custom of equality
You hand over the reigns of the world’s ownership to your husband,
Aequalis,
His half of the year to waning winter darkness..”
Valera stirred the ashes with her right index finger.
“ May your pain and anguish be blown away,
leaving nothing more than whispers on the wind. ”

When we returned, Marcus was waiting for us. He handed me a glass of red liquid that had a strange, sickly sweet taste to it. “ Dr. Franco said this would help you rest and dream. ” Marcus laid his head on my pregnant belly. “ Can you hear them? ”

I saw a vision of my mother.

.....

The wind whispered and moaned as I made my way to the summer solstice ceremony. There was a new moon with storm clouds about to spew forth rain and when I arrived, the only person there to greet me was the coven leader. “ I’m the only one allowed physical contact with you for your initiation rites this evening, but the other members will be praying and fasting as you are joined to us, forsaking all others but Hella Dracon and Blaec Toth Snaca. ” I stood in front of a small fire as he dipped a quill pen into a dark liquid mixture and marked my hands and face; strange symbols which writhed and entwined into gold, blue, red, orange, and yellow snakes. Then he handed me a silver chalice. “ Drink it all to honor our God and Goddess. ” As I swallowed, the leader read from the Laws Of True Worship: “ Blaec Toth Snaca and Hella Dracon, cover Lousanne in the eternal light of your Egyptian henna
Let your hawthorn blood circulate throughout her pulsing system
To purify and keep her safe from peril among those who do not believe
May your justice and mercy make her
not just an adopted member of your family,
but your daughter in reality
Grant her the world of your endless possibilities
Offering sanctuary, peace, prosperity, and law
Hope, trust, mercy, and love. ”

Adoration rose in my blood, and I fell to my knees, praising Hella Dracon and Blaec Toth Snaca; it was then that I knew my destiny was not to be mated on a human level, but to become the soul possession and property of the unknown angel, who said his name was Chas. He was there beside Sheridan when she delivered our healthy baby girl. “ Her name is Nhance, cherished and consecrated as my only begotten daughter. ”

After he left, Sheridan and I lived a somewhat normal life for the 1st year of Nhance’s life. She kept up with her painting and when the picture was finished it showed a road on a mountainside with dark scudding clouds passing in front of a full red moon. On the day it was finished, she said she had to leave for personal reasons.

A few months later I happened to find some old papers that I thought might lead me to answers about my lineage, mainly a letter from Annelle Aleanse talking about her cousin Desiree’s marriage to Marcus Canossa. I went through public records and found a telephone number and address for the current Marcus Canossa and wrote to him, hoping he could tell me about my family.

I told him I had papers from my great, great, great, great-grandmother and that we were distantly related through marriage. When he called, I mentioned the name Annelle Aleanse, and he told me that Annelle and Desiree' were cousins. I asked if it would be possible for Nhance and me to come for a visit. He said yes, and that he and his sister would be overjoyed; the date of April 15th, 1978 was set for our arrival and meeting. We flew to Springfield as planned, and I was met at the airport by a tall man with dark hair and crinkly eyes..he escorted us to a big black car and we were on our way to his home. Marcus seemed genuinely happy that we had made the trip, but I past surprised when I saw Sheridan standing in the doorway of the castle. I figured that she and Marcus must be married and that is why she left Nhance and me to fend for ourselves. She pretended to be happy that we were there, but I felt an aura of hate surrounding her, and my suspicions were justified when she asked to hold Nhance..my baby was terrified and cried and screamed until I took her away and calmed her fears.

“ Nhance must be overly tired after our trip. ” I laid her down in a nearby cradle. “ I don’t want to impose on you and your driver, so tomorrow I’m going to rent a car for my own convenience. ”

Sheridan brightened at that remark. “ Let me make all the arrangements for you as far as that goes, but other than that I want you to consider Casa Sher as your home away from home. ”

As we ate supper, Marcus told me the story about his ancestor who had married Desiree’ Terrance. Afterwards when Sheridan left the room to make arrangements for my car rental, I showed Marcus all the papers I had from Annelle Aleanse. He asked if he could keep and study them and I said yes, then he asked why I didn’t just use his car and driver, but I said I had a lot of things I needed to do in town and really enjoyed driving myself. He said that would be fine and we could spend all day Saturday together..Sheridan walked in at that moment. “ Marcus must really like you, Lousanne..he never puts aside special time for anyone. ” I took that to mean her included. Marcus took me to a special room that he said had been his mother’s room. I dressed, then gazed around the room; it was the height of femininity. The antique mahogany bed shone deep rich red in the afternoon sunlight and the satin sheets were the color of Pink Swiss Roses, adorned with white lace borders. The cover had delicate Swiss Roses embroidered on an ivory background, perfectly matching the wallpaper. It was comforting in a way and I smiled and rocked Nhance back and forth. We woke early, and had a simple breakfast of sausage and biscuits and strong hot coffee. Nhance sat on Marcus’s lap all the way into town..he made funny faces for her and she laughed and laughed. First on the agenda was the rental car and Nhance and I spent the day in town, getting my bearings, and right before going back to Casa Sher, I went to see a lawyer named Robert Arnold. I well remembered the DuMond Curse and I wanted to make sure that if anything happened to me, Nhance would be well taken care of. I put the papers in the glove compartment, and then I decided to drive a different route back..the area looked familiar and I recognized the landscape as being from Sheridan’s painting..we made it to the top of the hill that overlooked a beautiful valley and I stopped for the view. On the way down my brakes failed and I remember hugging Nhance tight and telling her that I loved her as the car went sailing over the cliffs to the canyon below.

An alternate dimension to the life I thought I knew.
That image faded from view and I woke to find myself inside a nightmare at the Turlough Chapel. I was still in my wedding attire, kneeling in prayer. I felt hands on my shoulders, but didn’t have time to react as I was turned

around by a person wearing the red-hooded cape and cowl of Blaec Toth Snaca. I reached out my hands and tried to tear his mask away, so I could see who was behind the disguise, but I felt cold scaly skin, and realized I was face-to-face with the Lord Of Chaotic Darkness. His flicking tongue caressed my lips and then he hissed. “ I never forget what rightfully belongs to me..Joseph Adams wasn’t your father, I am. You were conceived in evil, which you and your children shall bear throughout your generations. Your name is written in my book of death as my daughter of destruction, Nhance, from which the name Nancy evolved.. the name you were given at birth, a name of disruptive signals that I hold in the hollow of my hand. ” The blood drained from my face and I fainted dead away in the realization that the cracked mirror version I witnessed in the chapel included Blaec Toth Snaca dressed in angelic sheep’s clothing and my mother.

“ Arise, my daughter. ” I emerged from a deep slumber and looked into my father’s eyes. He took my right hand and placed a lilac/cream oval shaped quartz cameo ring in a goldtone setting on it. I drew in my breath. This belonged to your mother and I’m sure she’d want you to have it. I leaned close and saw the high relief. He turned it around so that only the gold band showed. was Annelle’s profile relief. . “ Sister, the beauty of your heart and soul can be seen in this piece of jewelry. ”

“ Yes, Desiree’; Reven gave this to me on our wedding day. I always wear it in his presence, but it travels with him on his sea journeys to remind him of the love we share. ”

and kissed both of my cheeks. “ You’re more beautiful than the last time I laid eyes on you, Nhance. If you agree to do my bidding, you’ll be given new powers of chaos and darkness, the likes of which the world has never seen. ” We were suspended between two worlds and I listened to his words as he pointed out each person who waited for us in the chapel.

“ You know I loved your mother with all my heart and soul..it was her inner purity and innocence which allowed the darkness of my powers to increase dramatically, because she willingly gave herself to me. ” I was puzzled by that statement. “ Opposites attract on a myriad of levels. Your mother wanted me to peel away her outer trappings to reveal the darkness which lay within her heart and soul; I gave her exactly what she needed. It will be the same for you and Adrian if you consent to be his wife. ” Angelo stood next to

Adrian and they quietly conversed. “ You know that Angelo can never be swayed to the darkside, so you must remain cautious around him, but all in all he should pose no problem. ” Last of all he pointed to the blonde beauty of Sheridan Grenoble who always thought she’d take over my position as true daughter to my father. “ Sher signed her own death warrant when she killed your mother and tried to kill you as well and will get her comeuppance in more ways than one, I promise you. ”

He turned me around and I stood face to face with Adrian Connor. My father had hired him and his band to play for my 17th birthday party. He had striking looks to go along with his talent and even though he didn’t smoke, his voice was raspy in its angered rage. I showed him some of my own music and melodies and he asked me to sing with him. My voice was a mellow contrast to his and we began collaborating on various songs. My father took it upon himself to become Adrian’s manager and not being one to let me out of his sight I traveled with them.

I clearly remembered the last time we had been together. “ Are you ready to go onstage with me or not? ” Adrian was in one of his foul moods, because once again I’d refused his offer of marriage. My frown turned into a pasted-on smile as he gripped my hands and we took center stage. Adrian took the mic. “ Hey all you punkers and rockers, it’s time to jumpstart your brains with L O V E, but first of all, I’m going to make an announcement. ” He slipped a silver ring on the 3rd finger of my right hand. It was beyond breathtaking in its pure simplicity..in the middle was a tear shaped Herkimer Diamond, surrounded by eight Apache Tears. “ Nhance, the Apache Tears are an opaque form of obsidian, a Sagittarius stone which retrieves souls, while the diamond signifies the purity of my love for you. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife? ” He thought that putting the love he felt for me in the spotlight would guarantee a ‘yes’ from my lips.

My father was a master of mind manipulation, and when I refused Adrian’s offer, my father’s rage got the best of him. I didn’t have enough power of my own to thwart his control and he gave me the ultimate punishment by letting my innocent alter ego come to the forefront and take over my life.

I suddenly realized I wasn’t alone in my body when I felt tiny kicks and prods and I moved my hands to my belly region. Adrian spoke. “ I’m glad you’ve agreed to marry me, Nhance. ” He placed his hands over mine. “ I’ll be the best of fathers to our babies. ”

I looked around the chapel..my father would officiate the service, and Adrian's Uncle Angelo would be his best man. He hugged me and whispered in my ear, " I'm here for your protection. "

I didn't have time to think about that comment as I was kissed on the cheek by Sheridan Grenoble. " I'm so happy to see you again, Nhance. " She hated my guts, no matter who I was and I knew she'd try to do me in.

I gave her my best pretend smile and the ceremony started. " Do you, Adrian Connor take to wife, now and forever, my daughter, Nhance on this 20th day of August? "

He took my hand and the moment he placed the Herkimer diamond on my 3rd finger, I felt Nancy's presence try to emerge. Although I remained in control, I knew I'd have to have a zircon replace the Herkimer, which was used for soul retrieval.

" Yes, I do, now and forever. " Adrian was all smiles.

" Do you, my precious daughter, take to husband, Adrian Connor, now and forever? "

" Yes, I do. " This was the day I had longed for..to start a new life and be given my inheritance.

" I now pronounce you husband and wife..you may kiss your bride, Adrian. " I half-heartedly responded to his kiss and we all walked outside to a waiting limo which took us straight away to the airport. He had made arrangements for us to fly back to America in his private jet. I sat beside my husband and dozed off.

Chapter 35

I woke up and was startled when I looked out the window as we passed through white puffy clouds and realized I was on a plane, headed for who knew where. I heard the rustle of paper and slowly turned my head, seeing a date of September 20th staring back at me. I raised my eyes and came face to

face with Adrian. He was dressed in a tuxedo and I still had on the white satin gown that Valera had given me to wear when I wed Marcus the 2nd time around.

He kissed my lips. “Nance, my darling wife..I’m glad you’re awake.” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, trying to relieve myself of this hallucination, but heard familiar voices. I opened my eyes and saw Sheridan sitting across from Adrian and me, and next to her was Angelo, who smiled in my direction.

Nothing made sense, especially Adrian’s next words. “I was just thinking about the first time we met.” I expected Adrian to recount our first meeting at Precious Metals, but he left me confused and bewildered. “When Angelo told me my first real gig was to play a birthday party, I nearly refused.” He laughed. “Playing serious music for a bunch of giggling teenage girls wasn’t my idea of moving ahead in the music world, but when I found out who your father was, I agreed to come.” His eyes became dreamy. “The moment I saw you, my heart was lost forever.” I thought back to my 17th birthday, but it was a blur like so many times before.

I was pleasantly surprised when I heard Desiree’. “Don’t let anyone remove your diamond wedding ring..it will keep you here in the present with Bethanie and me. Pay close attention to what Adrian says, so we can find out who he’s talking about.”

“I’m glad you’re here with me, Desiree’; for a while I thought I was going crazy.”

Adrian took a picture out of his wallet..I was beyond startled when I saw my face. Standing beside me was a younger vision of Adrian and a man I had never seen before. “Do you remember the first song we wrote, then sang onstage together?” On my lap he laid the original music and lyrics to ‘Love Is A Killer’, one of the songs he’d sung the first night I met him at Precious Metals.

You came, you saw, you conquered
Love is a killer
You said I was the only one
Love is a killer

Should have trusted my basic instincts

Love is a killer
Never turned my back on you
Love is a killer

Your love is like a dagger
Poised above my head
One final thrust and I begin to stagger
I'm past the point of being dead
Love is a killer

I wake each day to loneliness
Love is a killer
Black curtains drawn to shield the sun
Love is a killer

Azriel calls out my name
Love is a killer
Dark misery my only home
Love is a killer

My mausoleum chamber
Echoes night and day
You have no soul, bear no shame
Your claws rip my heart for prey
Your love is the killer

His name was in the upper right-hand corner and written underneath was my name with a different spelling. "I've kept everything from our former life together, Nhance." I knew next to nothing about music or lyrics or a former life with Adrian. He pulled out a small tape player and I heard a tinny rendition of the song. "Do you remember when we recorded this?" He continued as if a direct answer wasn't really what he wanted to hear. "My basement apartment was cold and damp, and my guitar was out of tune, but you said we'd make it to the top of the music industry because we had the inner fire and talent the world couldn't deny." He sighed. "When you refused to marry me, my life lost all purpose and meaning, but now I know the gods have smiled on me."

I remembered the girl he told me about who had broken his heart and here he was talking as if it had been me. Adrian looked deep into my eyes, touched

my cheek, then kissed my lips. “ How I’ve missed this side of you. ”

He got up and spoke to the pilot who came and took the seat beside me. He had short black hair and the blackest eyes I’d ever seen.

“ Allow me to introduce myself. ” He kissed the back of my hand and I shuddered. “ Chas Tureto at your service. ” He looked vaguely familiar. “ You might recognize me from my evangelical tv show that I host on Sunday mornings. ” A sanctimonious hypocrite if I ever saw one and I wondered what he was doing with Adrian. “ Adrian has agreed to sponser my latest religious broadcasts from the Old Deerfield River Compound, which is now my headquarters.

I had no time to ask pertinent questions as the plane landed and we climbed into another limo, arriving at the property that Adrian had inherited from his mother’s side of the family. We drove past the place where White Wolf Lodge had stood, but there was nothing left to see. “ One of these days I’m hoping to rebuild what was lost. ”

We traveled back-roads into North Central Massachusetts. “ It’s only been 2 months since we started renovations, but it’s being restored to its original splendor. ” The ivory colored house was two stories and the flat roof had a balustrade around it. The rounded front reminded me of my pregnancy with narrow side windows flanking the recessed front doorway. “ Most of the bedroom balconies you see are just for show. ” There were open air porches around the sides and back.

The simple outside belied what lay within. The Baroque style was theatrical and extravagant; anyone who entered was sure never to forget. The flooring was what first caught my eye. Adrian said, “ The geometric patterns are painted like those of a contemporary parterre garden, known as broderie. The Gemini motifs were taken from an ancient Egyptian embroidery pattern. ” They were set off by gold-gilded walls and silvered ceilings that reflected flickering electric candle-light chandeliers in the central ball room. Marble statues of intertwined couples graced the four corners of the room and against the far back wall was a staging area for live entertainment.

The living room had black and white marble squares..each square was clear-glazed in order to hold intricate snake designs, made from rubies and emeralds. There were numerous knole sofas with high-cushioned arms that were raised and lowered to form daybeds..the material used was finest silk

from China, and had the same designs as the marble squares. The walls were silkscreen prints of fiery dragons being offered sacrificial virgins. There were various displays of rare coins, prize-winning medals, Adrian's precious stones, and religious manuscripts hidden in plain sight. Desiree' and I both shuddered.

The dining area had a massive ivory table with intricate cuneiform marking set into its carved mother of pearl legs. The chairs were ivory thrones set atop pyramids. The plates were solid gold and the silverware, pure silver. The drinking utensils were solid gold, with handles shaped like snakes. The library housed many books, but I had reserved one wall for the gold records I knew that Adrian would receive for his original works. There were wing chairs or chairs with low, wide seats, high backs and scrolled arms of polished oak; they were upholstered in heavy Egyptian cotton, patterned in deep green holly leaves and bright red berries. The floor was also polished oak and matched the chairs.

The bedroom was of Adrian's own making; simple, but striking. The walls were adorned with intricate crewl-work; family pictures of Adrian, his father, and his Uncle Angelo, and pictures of Adrian and me at DuMond House in all my glorious pregnancy. " When the twins are born there will be a crewl-work of them also. The bed was round and the cover matched the color of Adrian's piercing blue eyes and I wondered if our babies' eyes would have the same color.

Adrian and I ate a lite supper of soup and salad, and when we finished there was a knock on the door. " I know you must be quite tired, Nhance, but I do wish you'd attend a special welcome home service at our main chapel downtown..Adrian is going to be the keynote speaker and it promises to be a full house. It will even be televised to all who can't attend in person. "

Chas left with Adrian and I took a quick shower. When I finished, a garnet colored box tied with an ivory bow had been laid on the bed. I opened it and nestled inside was a maternity dress especially made for me by Angelo, himself; a chic mid-calf shift that gradually faded from perfect black into shades of grey, then Arctic white.

It was twilight when we left in Adrian's limo. He sat in the front with Chas and I sat beside Angelo in the back. I kissed his cheek and thanked him for the gift. " As the mother to Adrian's children, you're entitled to the best of

everything. ” We drove past the downtown area of Springfield proper and soon the cityscape gave way to the warehouse district on the outskirts of town fronting Redrose River. I was surprised to see a new building where Precious Metals had stood. It now sported the name, Adrian's Element, but that's not where we stopped.

Across the street there had been a row of dilapidated warehouses that were on their last leg, but had been replaced by a beautiful stone-worked cathedral. The outside gargoyles were not hideous atrocities, but angelic visions of heavenly beings, pouring out their watered blessings on a thirsty world. Smoke-hazed plate-glass doors hung underneath an archway inscribed with words I didn't understand.

‘On the geats of hel habben ben opened,
thei kannenowiht beon claudere bi aenig manna,
other thaenne bi thei grete sacerfacere of eall.’

Our footsteps were muffled by expensive crimson carpet and we walked down the aisle to the front row of comfortable seats with a great view of the stage. “ The workers are setting up for the 9pm telecast. ”

Angelo and I took a front row seat while Adrian and Chas went backstage to get ready. People filed in quietly and filled up the empty seats, till there was only standing room in the back. At 9pm sharp Adrian took center stage, singing songs of adoration and praise to a God of Light while a heavenly choir backed him up.

‘God of grace and light
Bend us to your will
Show us that your power and might
Is perfected still
In thought, word, and deed
All your love is shown
From bonds of slavery, we are freed
You claim us for your own’

The lights were turned down, and Chas floated in mid-air, suffused with a golden glow that surrounded him, emanating from an overhead rose-window. I wondered how many people would be taken in by this wolf in sheep's clothing and I thought to myself, ‘Lucifer has arrived.’

“ My brothers and sisters of faith, does it seem like a lifetime of worries and

responsibilities have left you with nothing to show? Do you believe that you're all alone in your pain and misery?" Heads nodded and I heard people murmuring 'yes'. "Once upon a time I felt as you do, but all good things come to those who patiently wait and believe." He held out his hand. "Just yesterday, I had the privilege of giving my darling daughter, Nhance, into marriage with none other than Adrian, and they're expecting twins in October."

A bright light shown down on me and I couldn't escape when Kermes Twa made her presence known. "The barrenness of winter fast approaches; your Father has come to claim you as his own and you must do his bidding."

What had happened inside the Turlough Chapel wasn't a nightmare, but stark reality. I stood beside Adrian, and the man who was my father kissed my cheeks and introduced me to the world. "My first and only begotten daughter, Nhance; emerging from midnight darkness into eternal light."

There was thunderous applause, whistles and cheers. In that one moment darkness and light blended into a new persona of opposing forces, reminding me of Cain and Able in the Garden of Eden. I'm sure my father was having a good laugh, seeing who would come out on top. Darkside hatred and righteous indignation welled up to overflow in screams of agony which the audience mistook as a spiritual sign from heaven. In the struggle for supremacy, we finally realized the equality of our powers; the only way to co-exist in one body was to maintain a delicate balance, which couldn't be altered in any way, shape or form. My father bent towards my ear and I heard his voice along with Kermes Twa whisper, "Take a deep breath and begin to fulfill your integrated destiny."

Bethanie came to the forefront. "I have awakened to a brand new day, a brand new way of living life..transformed by the blood of love." My father draped a crimson robe around my shoulders and I spread my arms. "Don't hesitate to let this transformation begin with you tonight, faithful followers..let the blood of communion enter your hearts and souls and be saved."

Ushers began going up and down the aisles, handing out glasses of red liquid. Every glass was raised as Adrian began to sing very softly..

‘Hate transformed to guiding love
Reigns down on us, from above
To flow into our heart of hearts
Our spiritual journey, now we start’

He clasped Desiree’s necklace around my throat and tears came to many eyes and they knelt in prayer to the god of light and love, but my father watched intently for the few who asked for more, the ones who would easily become addicted to the blood of Blaec Toth Snaca..the ones who would sell their souls to him and do his dirty deeds with no questions being asked.

The crowd took their seats and waited for Adrian to speak. “ Love is an elusive spirit..we may think we have a line on it, have captured it and bent it to our own will, but that’s the very time it slips right through our fingers like a million grains of sand and is lost..that’s when our convictions are tested. We can let our feelings of loneliness and rejection push us to the brink of suicide or use our faith to help us continue living. ” He looked directly at me. “ Faith brought my wife to me. ”

Adrian kissed my lips, then we sat down while the choir sang and my father took his place at the podium. “ I want to call someone else to the stage. ” Sheridan had waited in the wings for her grand entrance. “ My adopted daughter of the heart, Sheridan Grenoble. ” He kissed her cheeks and hugged her tight. “ She has been by my side through thick and thin, and has just tonight consented to become Adrian’s new manager. ”

I didn’t know what my father had up his sleeve, but heard Desiree’. “ This is what’s known as keeping your enemy close at hand. ”

I smiled, got up and congratulated her. Adrian did the same, then put his arms around both of us as we sat on either side of him. The one thing that the dark and light inside of me agreed on was that Sheridan had to go..that was a starting point to bond with.

I listened as my father began speaking to the audience. “ There is nothing more precious than family..remember that as you go to your respective homes. Love and cherish them with all your strength and might. ”

The telecast came to an end and Adrian was surrounded by female fans wanting his autograph. A few even asked for mine and I signed it ‘Nhance’,

as if I had written it that way all my life. They finally left and I saw my father speaking to the few stragglers who'd given their hearts and souls to his darkness. He put his arm around me and drew me close so I could hear what he was saying. "My daughter is tired after her long journey, but we'll have a small group of faithful followers meet us later tonight so we can make plans for our next revival...she and I will both be here." He squeezed hard and I nodded yes, only knowing I had to obey his wishes.

We left then gawking at us and met up with Adrian and Sheridan in the limo. They were chattering about Adrian's upcoming Club opening. "There's still quite a bit of work to be done, but it will be ready by next week. Electricians are coming tomorrow to install state of the art lights and sound system."

"What does it look like inside, Adrian?"

"At the moment, it's an empty shell, waiting to be filled by your ideas."

I was surprised and pleased. "Thank you, Adrian..with you I can always expect the unexpected gift of love and understanding." I smiled and kissed him full on the lips, snuggled into his arms and fell asleep.

Adrian carried me upstairs to our room when we arrived at the compound, but by then I wasn't the least bit sleepy. "Your father wants to speak to you and Sher and I have some things to discuss, but I won't be long."

Chas entered the room. "I'm sure you know who I really am by now and I hope you won't hold it against me." He reached for my hand and held it between his. "Even those who are evil can feel love in their hearts." He smiled and I wondered what he wanted. "The only thing I want is for you to get to know me as your father, then make a decision as to whether you can love me or not."

"Make no hasty decisions where your father is concerned." Kermes Twa was right.

"I know you're wondering why your thoughts and memories of Adrian and me have been suppressed and why I allowed you to grow up in the orphanage." I nodded my head yes. "Anonymity was the only guarantee of safety for you after your mother was killed."

“ Why did you allow my mother and me to fly to America if you knew beforehand that she was going to die? ”

“ I’m not a god of omnipotence, so I can’t always foretell future events. Your mother didn’t know much about her parents’ lineage, so when she found a letter from Annelle Aleanse talking about her cousin Desiree’s marriage to Marcus Canossa, she went through public records and found a telephone number and address for the current Marcus Canossa and wrote to him, hoping he could tell her about her family. ” I nodded and he continued. “ I didn’t think that Sher’s jealousy of you and your mother would lead to the ultimate betrayal. ” He looked me directly in the eye. “ I was devastated when I lost your mother, but elated when Dr. Franco found you and brought you to the orphanage. The owners and I had a secret pact that no one was to find out about your identity. I came back for you when you turned 17, but you were more than a handful with your own thoughts about life and living, reminding so much of your mother and her ways. I know you think it was my idea to suppress your memories of Adrian and me, but the truth is we had gone to the orphanage to retrieve your belongings, and you had a tumble down the back stairs; when you came to, your whole personality had changed into that of your mother’s innocence. I decided not to interfere, but see what you could and would become without my influence. You’ve surprised me on more than one occasion, with so many recent twists and turns. ” He laughed. “ I couldn’t have done better with your life if I had planned it that way. ” Adrian entered the room and Chas kissed my forehead. “ Sleep well, beloved Daughter. ”

“ Did you and your father have a nice conversation, Nhance? ”

“ It was more than enlightening, Adrian, but there are still some blank areas; what do you know about my accident at the orphanage? ”

He gave me a blank stare and I repeated to him what my father had said.

“ Your father told me that you had gone away in order to discover yourself and that you didn’t wish to see or hear from me. ”

“ I do remember waking up with a terrible headache that gradually faded away and soon after that being offered a scholarship to Springfield University. I finished my courses in three years, then went to work as David Winslow’s executive assistant. I wasn’t there quite a year when he asked me to help him with his Charity Ball. ” I shook my head as I remembered all too

well the events that led me to Marcus, then back full circle to Adrian.

“ It’s all right..we should be concentrating on the future instead of the past. ” He kissed my lips and held me close to his heart, which began beating in conjunction with mine. He helped me undress, and began kissing my protruding belly, which caused goosebumps of delight to rise on my skin. “ I know exactly what you want..what’s been denied to both of us in the giving and receiving of blood. ” He removed his necktie and shirt, giving me a view of his jugular vein, throbbing in anticipation of what was to happen.

He undressed himself the rest of the way and sat in an armless chair; my breathing quickened and my eyes glazed over as I realized what his intentions were. I impaled my body onto his erect manhood, and when he began rocking us back and forth, I sank my fangs into his neck, my physical hunger for his life force being satisfied in crimson torrents that intensified into a vampiric lava flow that engulfed both of us in a pleasure we’d never been privy to before. Adrian was snoring as I slipped off of him, then applied a potion of agrimony and amaranth to his wounds, to staunch the bleeding.

His blood rushed throughout my body, and I no longer felt tired, but energized. I showered and put on fresh clothes, then slipped out the door. Downstairs I met my father and he drove us back to the Downtown Chapel. It had been transformed into my father’s own personal version of Monasterium Damnare, Monastery of the Damned. “ What you see before you is for meetings and offering homage to me and Hella Dracon. ” He pointed upwards and a false ceiling opened up to reveal gloomy upper walls and grotesque stonecast monsters in each corner..four human heads with their mouths wide open and in place of tongues, giant intertwined snakes protruding to form one writhing body of my unholy father, Blaec Toth Snaca. Holly leaves with thorny branches crowned each head, while fat globs of red blood dripped down the faces.

“ I know your real reasons for being here and there’s no need for you to worry. ” He brought out a white robe lined in black and placed it around my shoulders. “ This belonged to your mother. ” He kissed both my cheeks then led me to the first human head. He held a silver chalice below it, and blood poured forth. He marked my forehead. “ All good deeds eventually evolve into acts of evil in order to maintain the universal balance. ” I knew in that one moment that the only balance to maintain was in using innocence to

intensify the powers of darkness and revenge.

At the 2nd portal a golden scepter of intertwined snakes slithered into my father's hands; its flicking tongue traced and marked my hands and face; strange symbols which writhed and entwined into gold, blue, red, orange, and yellow snakes. "As your Father, I claim you as my own."

As we came to the 3rd face, a purewhite lamb stood beneath it. "You know what must be done." I plunged the ebony handled dagger into the lamb's heart, then took it out, still warmly quivering. I sliced it in half and offered my father the first piece as was his due. He burned his portion. "Take and eat the heart; garnering its innocence unto yourself, feeding the darkness which dwells within."

When I finished, I wondered what the last portal would entail. Instead of a grotesque face, I saw Adrian's countenance before me." The ceremony is complete, Nhance..Adrian's soul has come to you of its own volition..use it wisely to further my darkness in the world. "

All I could see in my inner vision was his innocent-tinged life. Desiree' piped up, "This might be fun, Nhance." She drew out my name, then laughed. "Now's the time for us to disobey all rules and regulations because that's the only way to get to Sheridan; revenge can be more than sweet, solving numerous problems for all of us. "

My father handed me a slim black book. Read this through Adrian's eyes.

'Sabrina's Journal.'

" " I grew up believing that outsiders were all one and the same. Nothing more than people who would use you for their own purposes, then cast you aside like an old tattered rag, but no one can change the winds of fate which blow through one's life.

I chanced to meet Phillip Connor when he was ten and I was seven; even then I knew I'd marry him.

He was raised by his uncle and aunt, Reven and Annelle Aleanse, after his own parents died on their 3rd wedding anniversary.' " A host of loving smiles enveloped me when their names came across my vision and I

couldn't wait to read more.

“ ‘Phillip and his cousin Raven always accompanied Raven's father to our stables because our horses were the best money could buy.

My father followed clan customs and never allowed me to be alone with them or even speak to them, but children always find a way to get together. We played and laughed in the warm sunshine near the river.

I well remember the days I'd sneak away from camp and spend time with Phillip at his Aunt and Uncle's home near the small city of Nancy. Even though my customs and religious beliefs were very different from theirs, they always treated me with kindness and respect. Raven and his parents attended regular Christian Church services,

but when Phillip turned 13, he was chosen to study for the priesthood under the tutelage of a local priest named Father Quimper. When his studies were through and he was ordained, Phillip would establish a church and mission in America.

Phillip and I spent what free time we could together and our love for each other deepened and when my family fell upon hard times, he offered my father a huge sum of money for my hand in marriage. The whole clan was outraged and against the idea, but Father paid them no mind, as he had creditors hounding him day and night.

Phillip proposed to me on the night he was no longer considered a legal ward of his aunt and uncle, and I didn't even mind the fact that by marrying an outsider, I would be considered an outcast from my people.' ”

“ ‘In order for Phillip to marry me, he said I must be willing to accept and receive the great spirit of Hella Dracon into my heart and soul and act as she commanded me with no questions asked. Once I said yes he told me that our wedding vows would be incorporated into his holy initiation ceremony.

The night was dark and starless as we rode together to the Nancy Cathedral; red candles lit our way to the catacombs beneath the main chapel. Phillip and I were parted and a red-robed monk led me to an inner room. ‘ Remove all your clothing and adornments, then cover your nakedness.’ I dressed in robes of purist white and waited until Father Quimper knocked on my door,

then followed him to a raised dais where Phillip stood proud and tall in black novice robes.

There were thirteen monks in attendance and Father Quimper began the ceremony. “ Dearly beloved followers, we are gathered here in the presence of Hella Dracon in order to unite this most special couple in the bonds of sacred oneness..as Phillip speaks his lifelong vows of faithfulness, love and humility to Hella Dracon, so he does with Sabrina, Hella Dracon’s choice of wife for him. ” Phillip had tears in his eyes. “ Do you, Phillip Connor take to wife, Sabrina Morganza, to be with her always in sickness and health, to love and cherish her all the days of your life? ”

Phillip said, “ I do. ”

Father Quimper turned to me. “ Sabrina Morganza, do you take to husband, Phillip Connor, to be with him always in sickness and health, to love and cherish him, all the days of your life? ”

I said, “ I do, ” then Phillip kissed me on my lips to seal our bonds of wedded love.

“ ‘ As soon as our wedding ceremony was finished Phillip and I departed the old land for the new, setting sail to America. In 1897 we settled near the Deerfield River in North Central Massachusetts and became well renown horsebreeders. I became pregnant in my 2nd year of marriage and we were blessed with a healthy baby boy, that we named Phillipe, after his grandfather. Upon his birth he was dedicated to serving Hella Dracon and was promised to marry our high priest’s daughter, Sarah. Life was pleasant and happy, and the years passed swiftly by. On Phillipe’s 18th birthday, he and Sarah married; they produced a healthy male baby in their 2nd year of marriage, and he was named Phillip after his grandfather. As our son was promised in marriage to the high priest’s only daughter, so was Phillip. More years have swiftly passed and I’ve grown old, and my husband has passed away, and soon I’ll be joining him, but am thankful that my days upon this earth have been filled to the brim with happiness and joy, thanks and praise be to Hella Dracon.’ ”

When I finished he said, read it again. The words changed into a much more sinister story.

“ ‘ Phillip proposed to me on the night he was no longer considered a legal

ward of his aunt and uncle, but in order for us to marry, he said I must be willing to accept and receive the great spirit of Hella Dracon into my heart and soul and act as she commanded me with no questions asked. Once I said yes he told me that our wedding vows would be incorporated into his holy initiation ceremony, then he explained that I'd be more than honored as no other female had been allowed to partake in the ritual services without undue harm befalling them.' ”

“ That would be more like a second, ” Desiree’ said. “ Sher was the first. ” She took up where I left off. “ ‘ The night was dark and starless as we rode together to the Nancy Cathedral; red candles lit our way to the catacombs beneath the main chapel.’ ” Bethanie and I felt goosebumps rise on our skin as Desiree’s thoughts centered on her encounter with the evil monks beneath the Nancy Cathedral. She continued. “ ‘Phillip and I were parted and a red-robed monk led me to an inner room. ‘Remove all your clothing and adornments, then cover your nakedness.’ I dressed in robes of purist white and waited until Father Quimper knocked on my door, then followed him to a raised dais where Phillip stood proud and tall in black novice robes. Thirteen monks came and prostrated themselves before us, then rose and kissed both of us on our left cheeks. One by one they walked to the granite altar where a crystal chalice and silver dagger had been placed. Phillip and I watched in fascination as they slit their wrists, and dripped their blood into the sacred cup. Father Quimper handed it to Phillip and me and we drank of the intermingled life force together. ‘ Phillip, raise Sabrina’s left wrist to your mouth and begin the marriage ritual.’ ”

Phillip drank of my life and love for only him. ‘Sabrina, I swear on all I hold holy that it will be your blood which sustains me through thick and thin, nourishing me now and forever.’ In turn, he gave his left wrist to me and I repeated the words back to him.’ ”

“ ‘ As soon as our wedding ceremony was finished Phillip and I departed the old land for the new, setting sail to America. On the ship were many poor immigrants and it was easy enough for us to find a couple will to sell us a young virgin for a small sum of money. Her name was Alyssa, blond and fragile. She instantly became our property and we fed her well, treated her as one of our family, thereby gaining her trust. In 1897 we settled near the Deerfield River in North Central Massachusetts and to outsiders we were well renowned horsebreeders. I wasn’t allowed to become pregnant for the 1st 2 years of my marriage to Phillip per the commandment of Hella Dracon

as tested both of us for our faithfulness to her. On the first night of the full moon Phillip was commanded to take Alyssa as his 2nd wife..she was the chosen vessel for the 1st of Phillip's seed, all the time she was pregnant, she was boastful, and filled with pride that she had been blessed, but the tables were turned when her baby was 2 weeks old; it was offered as a living sacrifice to Hella Dracon. Phillip killed his own flesh and blood by his own hand while we watched..Alyssa cried and moaned as we sprinkled its life force on all the dead holly bushes, and the next morning they were in full bloom and we knew that Hella Dracon was well pleased with us. To further Alyssa's misery she immediately became pregnant again, treasuring the life force within her blossoming body, but I was much happier than she because I knew that the end would be my beginning; when she was 6 months gone, I asked her to go for a walk with me in the woods. I gave her a cool drink laced with henbane to make her drowsy and barberry to stimulate the uterine muscles for an early baby that had no chance of surviving. I had brought a blanket with me and she lay down to take a nap while I waited for her birth pangs to begin. She was frightened and asked for my help which only heightened the pleasure I felt. I put a small pearl-handled dagger beside her, then I read from the Laws Of True Worship.

Hella Dracon

You bring the haughty to their knees,
cursing those who don't believe in your ways
Paying them back doubly
While rejoicing in receiving their blooded portion as your due

Alyssa keened and wailed as her contractions grew harder and when the baby finally came, I took it in my arms and held it out for her to see, but not to touch. " The heat of Hella Dracon's wrath be upon this innocent head. " I took a sharpened holly switch and marked its forehead with HD, then handed her the baby, which was dead before it ever entered this world; she didn't know that and when she realized she couldn't give it life she took the dagger and plunged it into her heart. I rolled her and her un-named baby in the blanket, then covered them in holly branches to honor the Great Goddess.

That night I was blessed with Phillip's seed and became pregnant with our son. Upon his birth he was dedicated to serving Hella Dracon and I thought we would always live within her generous graces, but she has allowed our baby to be taken from us, and we await the hangman's noose for practicing

our religion.’ ”

Chas handed me a newspaper clipping. ‘ Man and wife charged in the brutal slaying of mother and child. It only took the jury 15 minutes of deliberations to bring a guilty verdict in the trial of Phillip and Sabrina Aleanse, who were accused of the most heinous crime of double murder; killing the pregnant mistress of Mr. Aleanse in cold blood, so they could offer them as a living sacrifice to the goddess they worship, Hella Dracon. They will hang in the morning per judge’s orders.

The bodies of Phillip and Sabrina Connor were hung, then burned this morning, and their infant son has been placed in the care of his uncle and aunt, Raven and Claire Aleanse who recently moved here to America from France. When asked what they knew, they had no comment.’

My father answered my unspoken questions about what happened after. No matter how much innocent influence was around Phillip the 3rd, tainted blood runs deep. He followed in his parents’ footsteps, and their sins were visited down throughout the generations, until Adrian was born. Just the opposite happened with the seed of Raven and Claire Aleanse..innocence and purity were visited upon them for generations until you were born into the evil which exists in your heart of hearts. ”

I was repulsed by what Sabrina had done, yet at the same time felt a thrill of excitement rush through my veins; a blending of summer’s innocent warmth spreading into winter’s bitter darkness. “ This is exactly what your Mother felt; don’t hold back your feelings. Let them mingle and circulate, until there is no escape from drowning to be reborn in my image. ” He took my hands in his. “ We cannot choose our blood relationships, and for the most part don’t get to choose circumstances, but we are the Captains of our souls, and as such we have the ultimate say-so in the choices we make. ”

“ Kermes Twa operates much the same way that your father does, Nancy; they are 2 sides of the same coin and each can use the other’s powers to accomplish directives in the ways they see fit. ” Desiree’ spoke up.

“ Understand and heed my calling to your heart. ”

“ Thank you for telling me about my mother and my life..there’s still so much I don’t know or understand..”

He put his finger to my lips. “ Time will tell the tale which leads to your heart’s desire. ” He motioned to the limo driver. “ It’s time to go home to Adrian before he wakes. ”

I knew that being close to my father was the only guarantee of safety for me and my babies. My father sat in the backseat with me and I let myself relax within the circle of his arms.

Chapter 36

When I woke we were just a few minutes from Deerfield Ranch. I stretched and yawned. “ It’s good to be with you, Father. ”

“ It’s been a long time since you called me that. ” Chas beamed. “ Go be with your husband..make him as happy as you’ve made me. ” Adrian was fast asleep when I climbed in bed beside him. I couldn’t sleep, but decided to think about Adrian’s Element..a simple place that would showcase Adrian’s voice and style from emotional highs to desperate lows. At that moment Adrian woke up and gathered me into his arms.

“ Did you have sweet dreams of me? ”

“ Actually, I’ve been thinking about your club. ”

“ Our club..tell me about your ideas. ”

“ Do you remember that unique handkerchief you showed me? ” He nodded his head. “ The backdrop should be one that can be easily changed; a compliment to portray whatever type of song you’re singing to suit you perfectly; passion and love, pathos and sorrow; good times and bad times. ”

“ I know just the person to help us out with your plans. ” I was sure he was talking about Sheridan, but was pleased when he mentioned my father. “ He was the one who got the right contractor and workers for his Downtown Chapel. ”

We talked to my father and the transformation of Adrian’s Element began in earnest as the grand opening was to take place on Friday night. Sheridan oversaw to all the details while Adrian began writing new songs for the opening.

My father and I spent time at the Downtown Chapel and he began telling me about how he and Hella Dracon had come to be. “ Long before the Great God of Omnipotence had cast His eyes upon the planet Earth, Hella Dracon and I had claimed it as our own..she ruled the Plant Kingdom and I ruled the Animal Kingdom. Trouble arose in the form of humans over whom we had no authority..they mistreated and abused our kingdoms and we finally found a way to seek our revenge upon them and the God of Omnipotence who placed humans above us, giving them full sway and say over the both of us. ” He took me back to a place before time began..Hella Dracon was content to give of her bountied fruit, grains and grasses to the animals who lived in peace and harmony with each other. The humans desecrated the natural kingdom by killing animals for food and clothing, and then sacrificing their blood and meat to the Great God; giving nothing in return, and not caring that plants and animals have feelings also. That is when Hella Dracon gave the plant kingdom its natural defenses of thorns and poisons and I gave animals horns and the right to kill humans for their blood and meat as well..stinging and poisonous insects and monsters of the deep. Those humans who disbelieved what they couldn't see with their own eyes began to worship and adore us..whole societies built their religions around us, but were persecuted by other humans who said they were wrong. Wars between neighboring tribes took place, and to drive the point home, the conquerors held feasts to their dearly departed by roasting and eating the flesh of their enemies. These cannibals assured themselves that fresh souls would empower them while making those around afraid to do battle with them. Of course it wasn't true for they didn't know that the soul lives in the blood..it was discovered one day by a youth who had no taste for war. He was cast out of his tribe forced to wander in the deserts and forests by himself. He said he would dedicate himself to the gods of vengeance if he was shown how to gather power to himself for evil against most humankind. The youth had grown strong and cunning with a sharpened spear, killing only for sustenance and strength. One day not long after he prayed in the wilderness, his tribe's most holy leader came to offer homage to his own set of gods and goddesses. It was when his eyes were closed and his hands were raised his hands to heaven, that the youth struck his vulnerability with skilled precision, striking the leader directly in his heart. While it still beat, the youth cut it out and ate it raw..the power was his to subdue the rest of his tribe's leaders and become the first Vampire in the new world order. After that it was required that each young man and woman born into the tribe must pass the test of wandering until he or she found a religious leader of any tribe or nation to kill and eat his beating heart.. Soon religious leaders had to

hide in caves of darkness so they wouldn't be easy prey and over time, hunting and killing by the dark of the moon became the norm; the God of Light and Omnipotence was unhappy with that notion, so he put a curse on all Vampires, disallowing them any access to the Sun's warmth and light..to have even one beam of light touch them would cause instant death. That's when Hella Dracon and I joined forces and let the Vampir Familia take innocent blood from any and every source with no holds barred. began to act like the humans..the taking of innocent blood brought us power to conquer and exist in this world as you know it now. ” Chas looked me directly in the eye.

“ Was it always my destiny to be with Marcus? ”

“ It was never meant to happen..there should be no feelings of love or hate when it comes to the taking of innocent blood..it's a necessity, and nothing else. Sheridan's passionate hatred of Desiree' caused problems that haven't been repaired and now it's beyond our control until Sheridan dies. ”

” What of Desiree' and Bethanie? ”

“ Only you can determine how important they are to you in your life. ” I smiled, but Chas turned away, then sighed.

Desiree' whispered. “ He's unhappy with the notion that Marcus is only a heartbeat away..the amulet doesn't lie about feelings, Nancy. ” I looked intently at both sides and they showed the same scene; Marcus pacing back and forth at Castle Desiree', his eyes and mouth grim with determination to claim what was rightfully his at all costs.

At the front door, Chas spoke with calm assurance. “ There's no reason to believe everything you see with your own eyes, Daughter; at any rate I'll see he never comes close to you or your babies again. ” Marcus bore the stigma of being an unwilling Vampire; to have him return to my life would not allow me to take advantage of Adrian's innocence, which would give me untold powers. It was definitely a dilemma I would have to deal with on a daily basis because of the bond that Desiree' and I shared. I was suddenly tired and knew that my only cure was to partake of Adrian's blood once more. “ That's right, Nance; Adrian's life force will calm and nourish you..and I'm sure he wants to show you his new music. ” Guitar notes floated through the hall to reach my ears and I listened to music of a perfect

texture; dark and somber substance with a silver edging..the truth of Adrian's heart and soul.

Lady's Mantle

'You're my Lady's Mantle, graceful summer flower
Reigning kisses filled with magic at this dawning hour
Unfold your leaves of liquid mystery
Show me golden splendor, love me for eternity

Renew my hope and ardent vigor; bring me life anew
Lead me down your easygoing path, the brightness of your avenue
Create within me warmth, guiding sunlight spirit
Your face the deity in my charm, my protective amulet

Change the visions that I see, release my hellish nightmares
I'll fall down humbly on my knees; you'll be my one and only prayer
Help me live for here and now, share the dreams before and after
Rescue me from sorrow's wasteland with the cherry-wine of your laughter'

I was going to walk into our bedroom and tell Adrian how much I enjoyed his song, but walked quietly past the bedroom door to the end of the hall. A thin sliver of light emanated from under the door and I opened it. No one was in there, but on the nightstand was an open book of no beginnings and no endings, its origins unknown to me. ' Human beings who are drowning in devastating sorrows which flood the mind and soul are often befriended by seemingly harmless beasts; those beings who are often befriended by wolves in sheep's clothing.'

Kermes Twa spoke, " Adrian was devastated as a young boy without a mother to call his own, but he never realized or came to terms with it. Adrian prayed every night to whichever god would listen for his mother's return. Nhance, your father was the one who heard and it was his spirit in the form of the white wolf who entered Adrian, replacing Adrian's pain with the hungering drive to succeed as a writer of songs. His hunger increased the moment he laid eyes on you..no matter how much he receives from his music or his love for you, it will never be enough for him..he'll always be left craving more; your father will see to that. "

“ What am I supposed to do? ”

“ This is your father’s time with you and under no circumstances should you betray him. ”

“ What about Marcus? ”

“ He still has lessons to be learned, but have no worries..your life will be the way it was always meant to be. ” The Great Goddess left and took the book with her.

I slowly made my way back to the room I shared with Adrian; he grabbed my wrist and I sat and listened to ‘Lady’s Mantle’, knowing the song wasn’t about me, but Lorraine, his dearly departed mother. I hurt inside, for him and with him. He offered me his wrist when tears formed in my eyes. Marcus flashed in my vision and I knew deep down that I wanted to be with him, but as Adrian’s blood circulated throughout my system, I was content to see how my life would evolve with him and my father.

I slept like a baby and woke up when I heard footsteps coming down the hall. A knock came at my door. “ Daughter, can I come in? ”

“ Yes, Father. ” I hugged him and he beamed. “ I’m glad you’ve slept in. Adrian and Sheridan are over at the club, so it’s just you and me, spending the day together; I’ve had Cook make us a picnic lunch that we can eat at one of my favorite spots, so put on some comfortable clothes and shoes and I’ll meet you down-stairs. ”

After I dressed, we climbed into the limo and the driver took us further away from civilization and towards mountain wilderness. We stopped at an overlook and spread out in the valley below was the Deerfield River. “ I remember when I first came to this area..none of the natives had ever seen a white man before and it was so easy to befriend them. ” Chas had a gleam in his eye. “ When the high priest of one tribe was found with his heart cut out, they came to the immediate conclusion that a member of a neighboring tribe had done the dirty deed, because one of their ceremonial knives had been found at the scene. The first tribe massacred everyone in the second tribe..no questions were asked and no one was spared, and I was happy that over a

1000 humans perished that day. That night when all was quiet, my 13 monks held a feast to honor me. We drank our fill of innocent blood, and ate our fill of still warm hearts; today marks the 200th anniversary of that momentous occasion. ” Back in the limo, my father held my hand. “ Today, you will be the one who is honored. ” We drove for a couple of miles, then turned right on a gravel road. The ancient oak trees created a tunnel of sorts and Chas had the driver lower the windows. “ Any shadows that you see darting about are the innocent souls who lost their lives..if you listen closely, you’ll hear them demanding revenge from the god of the dead; today they’ll have a retribution of sorts and be able to rest in peace. ”

The limo driver opened my door and my father and I got out. I followed him on a narrow pathway deeper into the woods with the ghostly voices and shadows following close behind. We came to an opening and he stopped in front of a neatly kept field of Dragon Lady Holly. “ This is where we piled their bones after the feast. ” He turned me around so that my back was to the holly and I faced the forest of Dead Spirits. He gathered a handful of gravedust and sprinkled it in the wind. “ The blood of your lives was given in sudden anger, without warning and I know you seek retribution for being wronged. This woman who stands before you today is my only daughter, and I willingly offer her and her babies as a living sacrifice..do to her as you please. ” I closed my eyes and waited for the horror to consume and kill me and the lives which grew within. Nothing happened and I squinted, then watched as the spirits congregated towards a bright illusion and were trapped inside. My father molded them into a round talisman of red with golden sparks which moved and glittered. He placed the talisman on a serpentine chain, and clasped it around my neck. “ Nhance, acknowledge their innocence and feed on it for the darkness which lives within you. ”

Strength and power surged throughout my system and I fell to my knees in front of my father. “ Blaec Toth Snaca, Lord of Chaos. As your daughter, I ask that your blessings fall upon me and my children..teach me your ways so that I might adhere to them. Let me learn to love and serve you and Hella Dracon before all others, raising my children as you deem fit. ”

He handed me the Laws Of True Worship and I read from the book; “ ‘ To disobey the spoken word..to disavow the written word brings ultimate death to those who have turned their backs on the Laws Of True Worship. The life which was given to them at our pleasure is taken with no emotion at

our leisure.’ ”

I quelled the rebellion which started in the pit of my stomach before Desiree’ made her feelings known to my father. “ We’ll discuss this later when we have some privacy, but right now would be too dangerous. ”

We walked back towards the limo and on a black checked tablecloth were two plates of hot food, a thermos, and 2 glasses. My father spoke. “ Let the ritual words come to you and flow out of you into the winds of change. ”
“ Hella Dracon, let this sacrificial food of roast deer, wild onions and carrots we eat nourish and strengthen our bodies, minds and hearts to your will. Let the blood of your victims circulate throughout our systems to guide and direct us. ”

As I ate and drank, I didn’t feel Hella Dracon or my father’s evil in my soul. Desiree’ smiled in triumph as her necklace began to beat in time with my heart and I heard the voices of the fallen speak to me to save them and set them free to find their own way to heaven, and not be stuck in limbo the rest of their days. Desiree’ said, “ She will, but you’ll have to trust her and me. Now be quiet or we’ll all suffer the consequences. ”

My father put his hand over the amulet and all he could hear were screams and moans, nothing else. On the way home my father talked about his upcoming program which would air on Sunday morning. Of course Adrian, Sheridan and I would put up a united front with him. “ I have to prepare a speech that will go out over the airwaves and persuade many who hear to send in donations..you know it’s money and blood which make the wheels move in a forward motion. ” About that time we drove up to Deerfield Ranch. “ I have work to do for my upcoming tv program, but I’ll see you in the morning. ”

He went to his room, and I went to mine. Adrian was nowhere in sight. Desiree’ said, “ Now’s the time to do a little snooping. ” I didn’t have far to go. I went to Adrian’s side of the closet and found a dusty briefcase near the back wall; inside was a scrapbook filled to the brim with newspaper clippings that my father had kept for many years. Most of them dealt with death and destruction that mankind had perpetrated upon themselves by various and sundry means, not one iota of any good happenings that I ran across. One clipping intrigued me; it bore no date, but was a story in the

society page of the Salem Patriot, a local newspaper. The Annual Mid-Winter Charity Ball held by David Winslow's company last night was a major success; more than enough funds were raised to complete a new research lab which will be used to find cures for blood-related diseases and disorders. The donation which put it over the top was given by none other than world traveler Marcus Canossa, known for his philanthropic donations to charitable organizations.' Underneath it was a short update to the story. ' Rumor has it that the most eligible bachelor in town, Marcus Canossa is no longer available; Sources close to this author say that he met and married the girl of his dreams shortly after the Mid-Winter Charity Ball.' They were pasted on a white sheet of paper, and scrawled underneath was strange handwriting; ' Like mother, like daughter..when Lousanne left me I swore that I'd find her and make her pay dearly. She thought she had me snowed with her pious airs, but I knew that right below the surface of her mind, raging passions would soon surface for Marcus Canossa and I'd be left out in the cold..seems as if my daughter has followed in her mother's footsteps. I made the mistake of letting her develop her innocent side, but she was drawn into his evil trap as well. I'll bring Adrian back into the picture and resolve that little problem.'

I wondered if there was more to the relationship that Marcus and my mother had than what I already knew. I didn't have time to dwell on that bit of news when the door opened and Adrian came into the room. I slipped the briefcase under the bed and walked to his open arms. " I think you'll be well pleased with what we've accomplished at the club. Tomorrow night is a complete sellout. "

The words I wished he would have used were the show was sold out of tickets..sellout had a much more sinister feel to it.

" That's wonderful Adrian. I know that your audience has been missing you and your music. Just as much as I missed you while we were apart. "

He kissed me with longing and yearning and I melted into his arms. " Let me show you how much I love you and our babies. "

Adrian was gentle as he removed my robe, then laid his head on my pregnant belly.

" I sing this lullaby of love
which stretches the inner boundaries

shapings of motherhood and twinship
two who'll influence the destiny of each other
and alter the world of another ”

He kissed the back of my hand and sent shivers down my spine; I thought we'd make sweet passionate love, but he raised his eyes to mine and I detected a glimmer I hadn't noticed before. He turned my wrist over and before I could stop him he sank his teeth into my vein. I tried to pull away but his strength was overpowering..when he finished he had a smirk on his face and I was weak and dazed from blood loss. “ How long did you think you could deny me my husbandly rights to all of you? From now on you'll comply with all my wishes and your father's commands. ” Before he left our room he said, “ Don't think you can get away with anything; your blood tells all. ”

“ Seems as if Adrian has turned over an old leaf and we're the recipients of your father's manipulation, Nancy. ” I didn't know what Desiree' was talking about. “ Your father has planted certain ideas into Adrian's heart and soul; your father has told Adrian that the only way to keep you close by his side is to take and take and take from you until you're too weak to resist him or your father. Through Adrian, your father will seek to subdue, dominate, then take full control of you. ” I absorbed that thought. “ Now that Adrian has tasted your blood, he will fast become much more than your father's disciple..he'll become 2nd in command. ”

“ How do I counteract and stay strong for me and my unborn children? ”

“ Kermes Twa has things well in hand. ”

Adrian swept through the door, and behind him came a woman dressed in white holding a medical bag; she wore dark raybans and I recognized her immediately. “ Your father has agreed that Valera can take care of you and our babies, under the stipulation that she will have no contact with Marcus or Gustav. ” He kissed my forehead and left again.

I rushed over and hugged her for all she was worth. “ Valera, it's so wonderful to have you with me again. ”

She slipped a thermometer in my mouth and placed her index finger over the same wrist vein that Adrian had drank from. “How are you feeling this

evening? ”

“ Like I could spit nails if I had the energy. ”

“ Your temperature is on the low side and your pulse is fast and thready; that’s not good for you or your babies. I’ll be back in just a moment. ” She went to the bathroom and came back with a glass of water. She took 3 vials out of her bag and stirred them into the water. While I drank all of it she explained what she had added.

“ Kelp is a terrific boost for pregnancy with over 30 vitamins and minerals; Iceland moss is a lichen which is used to nourish those who are weak. Taheebo is a powerful herb which gives the body the energy needed to defend itself. ” She dipped her finger in a last vial and massaged it on my forehead and between my eyes. “ Sandalwood oil will help center and calm your mind and peppermint’s essential oil will help create a positive change in your life. ”

I began to feel stronger, both mentally and physically. Words developed in my heart and I spoke them outloud.

‘Kermes Twa, much of my life has been confused and mis-represented
Please guide and direct my outer and inner being to satisfy you in all ways
Keep me and the lives that I hold dear, safe from negativity and defeat.’

“ The Great Goddess says that as long Adrian doesn’t take blood which flows directly to your heart, you’ll be able to keep your secrets well hidden. ” Adrian walked back through the door and she said, “ I’ll return in the morning to check on you, Nancy. ”

Adrian undressed and climbed into bed, like nothing had happened between us. He took my hand and placed it over his heart, then gave me his wrist to feed on. “ I want you to know that anything I do is for your own good. ” I could picture my father gloating in the background. It was a good thing I was feeding or I would’ve said something to regret. After I was through, I yawned, and Adrian encircled me in his arms. “ We both need to sleep, because tomorrow is the big day and even bigger night. ”

When I woke, Adrian had already gone to the club..he had left the morning paper beside my bed and the page was open to the entertainment section. ‘By invitation only, Adrian’s Element will hold a private showing of what promises to be the best club in the area, showcasing Adrian Conner and his

musical talents. Look in tomorrow's column for details.'

" Well what do you think of life with Adrian and your father now? Is it everything you expected and more? " Desiree' snickered as a knock came at the door.

I put on my robe and opened it. Valera came in and hugged me to her breast and Angelo kissed me on the cheek, then laid a white velveteen box on the bed. " How are you feeling? " I wasn't sure how best to answer him, but he said, " I know about Adrian and your father's influence on him. I was hoping he wouldn't revert back into the old Adrian, but I can see by your eyes that he has. "

" I have no memories of him being this way, Angelo. "

" Adrian was descended from the first vampire tribe; when Lorraine disobeyed the Laws of True Worship by marrying an outsider, her fate was sealed and she doomed herself to death. Just as you are a blend of innocence and evil, so is Adrian, and that's why your father chose him to become your mate. He entered Adrian's heart and soul in the form of the white wolf from the aspen grove. "

" Is there anything that we can do to save him? "

" Adrian has come to the point in his life where his destiny calls and we cannot prevent what will happen to him. " He handed me some papers.

'I, Adrian Connor, being of sound body and mind do solemnly swear by The Laws Of True Worship that I freely give all of me, heart, body, and soul to the God of Chaos and Darkness in return for his daughter, Nhance and our unborn child.'

It was signed in blood.

Valera said, "Adrian will draw a huge crowd of innocents into your father's fold, in order to lead them into a second slaughter, a blood bath of immense proportions. The Great Goddess says you are not allowed to interfere in any way, until New Year's Eve. " I sighed as a great heaviness lay on my heart and soul at her words. " Come, I'll draw you a warm bath so you can prepare yourself for tonight. "

Angelo went downstairs to wait and I disrobed, then climbed into clean water. Valera placed red, green, and black candles around the tub and as she lit them, ritual words came to my mind and spilled forth from my lips.

‘Kermes Twa, I come to you
my heart, soul and body bare
open to the colors set forth before my eyes
the extreme intensity of red which dominates the world I live in
the power of life and blood
Green is universal spring and summer;
the nature of fertility’s hope and renewal
Black speaks of winter’s authority;
the devil’s despair and death’s mourning.
The cycle is continuous and is never broken,
never separated from blood which represents both life and death’

When I stepped out, Valera gave me a glass of red liquid. I tasted Adrian’s essence, but the underlying taste was one of pomegranates. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw Marcus and I gasped. Valera smiled in my direction. “ Is there something wrong? ”

“ Only the fact that I feel like Marcus is here with me. ”

“ You’ve seen a vision of what you want in your life, Nancy. ”

Desiree’ laughed. “ Pomegranate is considered by many scholars to be the apple that Eve ate in the Garden of Eden, and Marcus is your own ‘forbidden fruit.’ ” I frowned. “ It’s all right, Nancy..just remember that Adrian’s blood circulates throughout your entire system, while the pomegranate juice goes directly into your heart of hearts and remains hidden from view. ”

“ You’ll get used to the conflict as time goes by, but you need to get dressed so we can make it to Adrian’s Element by 6pm. ” I opened the box that Angelo had left on my bed; inside was the perfect dress for me to wear. A long black silk sheath, trimmed in shimmery red and green swirls. The colors which matched the candles and my life.

We climbed into Angelo’s car and Desiree’ turned on the radio. We caught the tail-end of an interview Adrian had done with a local dj. “ How do you think that marriage and a pregnant wife will change your career? ”

“ I love my wife with all my heart and soul and with her by my side, all my

dreams will come true. And having a baby with her will only strengthen what we already share. ”

“ Rumors are rampant that your wife was married before. ”

“ Even if she was, that’s between her and me and is nobody else’s business. ” There was an edge to Adrian’s voice as the interview ended.

“ Your father has told him that blackberry juice will keep his voice smooth and mellow, but in Adrian’s case it will enhance the negativity he’s beginning to feel, now that his soul is not his own. ”

Angelo pulled up in front of the club and Valera and I got out amidst flashbulbs and screaming fans. We were quickly escorted inside and seated at a ringside table with my father, so we could see the whole show, upclose and personal.

Adrian came onstage wearing a black shirt and trousers, his blond hair a stark contrast, his voice and guitar holding the audience spellbound. After he sang ‘Lady’s Mantle’ the applause was thunderous, then came the finale. The lights went out, and barely came up to focus on a cemetery backdrop, with a shadowy figure digging a grave.

Love Is A Killer

You came, you saw, you conquered; you said I was the only one
Should have trusted in my basic instincts, left well enough alone
Wasn’t long before I was addicted, you became my drug of choice
A habit of intense emotion wreaking havoc; misery’s darkened voice
Love is a killer

The outer trappings of my life portrayed as sheer perfection,
Because the universe at large sees nothing wrong with cheap affection
Grand illusions sparkling off the gaudy baubles it admires,
My inner vision fades to appalling black-hole quagmires
Love is a killer

I wake each day to loneliness, thick curtains drawn to shield the sun
Sharpened claws which bear no shame, summer dressing come undone

Exposure's proof traumatic, feels much colder than the frosty rime
of late November autumn living past its prime
Love is a killer

Your heart's a pointed dagger poised above my head
One final thrust and I begin to stagger, a different path that I must tread
My flesh a rotting corpse, Azriel rips my soul for prey
Builds a mausoleum chamber of eternal nothingness that echoes death's
decay
Your love was the killer

When the set ended, the clock struck midnight, and as the lights came up, I
saw a few fans head towards Adrian's dressing room, where I was sure my
father waited to receive their blood and obeisance.

A tv reporter shoved a mic in my face. "How did you enjoy the show, Mrs.
Connor?"

"My husband always amazes me with his musical prowess." Adrian walked
back in and amidst all the claps and cheers the reporter headed that way.
"Valera, I need to freshen up. I'll be back in a bit."

I walked, not to the ladies room, but outside to get some fresh air. Traffic
was heavy, but the sidewalk was almost empty and I sat down to gather my
wits. A non-descript car stopped across the street and the driver turned his
motor off, then he got out and sauntered in my direction. I was hoping
against hope that it might be Marcus, but was disappointed when I didn't
recognize him. "I see you didn't get an exclusive invite, either."

"I didn't actually need one, as Adrian's my husband."

"You're a lucky woman, then." He extended his hand and helped me up,
and I felt him slip a piece of paper into my palm. He smiled, winked, and
headed back to his car.

I walked to the ladies room for a bit of privacy, then opened my hand and
the note it contained. 'Your love still belongs exclusively to me.' It was
signed 'M'. I flushed the note down the toilet and went back out to sit with
Angelo and Valera. Adrian was still doing interviews and being
congratulated for what would definitely be his success.

Chapter 37

“ You look flushed, Nancy..do you feel all right? ” Valera felt my forehead and took my pulse. About that time, Adrian, Sheridan and my father finished their interviews and came over and joined us.

All 3 of them gave me questioning looks. “ I’m fine..just a bit over-heated with all of tonight’s excitement. ”

I fanned myself with a napkin while Sheridan rolled her eyes, then leaned over and whispered, “ You have no idea what excitement really is, Nancy, but you’ll soon find out. ”

“ Angelo, why don’t you and Valera take my wife on home..Chas and I have business matters to discuss and Sheridan is going to count receipts and ticket sales for tomorrow night’s grand opening. ” He kissed me on the cheek, just as if I were another adoring fan to be dismissed at his leisure.

I didn’t know what to think, but was glad for the opportunity to go home. I walked out into the parking lot with Valera, and climbed into the back seat; even though I closed my eyes Desiree’ wouldn’t let me rest. “ What are you going to do, Nancy? ”

“ About what? ” I asked the question, even though I knew she was talking about the note from Marcus.

“ The problem you seem to have with the men in your life? ” She laughed. I opened my eyes and noticed that we weren’t driving towards Deerfield Ranch, but up into the mountains. He pulled off onto a gravel road and drove to an overlook, then stopped.

“ What’s going on? ”

“ Is there something wrong, Countess Nancy? ” The driver’s voice didn’t belong to Angelo, but to Gustav.

“ Marcus needs to see you and make sure you’re all right. ” Valera smiled.

“ But what about my father, and Adrian? ”

“ Since they’ll be way too busy having a feast of sorts to think about you or your whereabouts until tomorrow morning, and by that time you’ll be back home with no one the wiser. ” She held my hands and touched my cheek.
“ The Great Goddess has given her permission. Let’s get some fresh air. ”

The stars twinkled in the vast expanse of heaven and I wished for pure simplicity, but accepted the fact that nothing in my life would ever be that way when a car drove up and tuned off its headlights. I heard a door open and close, and it only took a second before Marcus held me in his arms, then kissed me deeply. Against my better judgement, I melted into him, wanting more than anything to be with him forever and always. “ Why did you leave me and go back to Adrian? ”

“ It was my father’s idea, Marcus. ” He gave me a questioning look.
“ My real father wasn’t Joseph Adams, but Chas Tureto. ”

He took that into consideration as he looked out over the canyon. “ What proof has he given to you? ” I held out my right hand to him. “ This gold ring could have come from any jewelry store in the world. ”

Words came from my mouth. “ Turn it around Marcus. ”

He and Desiree’ both gasped. “ I remember the night Annelle showed me her brooch cameo. ”

“ My father said it was passed down through the generations to my mother and she gave it to him on the night she conceived me. ” As Marcus fingered the ring, it suddenly dawned on him who my real father was. “ That’s right, Marcus, Chas Tureto is an anagram for Blac Toth Snaca. ” Tears formed in my eyes, but he kissed them away. “ My father bears many grudges against you; first for choosing Desiree’ over Sheridan. He also seems to think that you would eventually have taken my mother away from him, and then last, but not least, taking my love and virginity for your own when he had already promised me to Adrian. ”

“ You have sole power over your destiny, Nancy; not anyone else. Come home to Castle Desiree’ with me. ”

I sighed. “ The Great Goddess says that I can’t betray him, so I can’t let him know that we’ve met tonight. ” Marcus scowled, but knew I was right. “ Kermes Twa will let Valera know when it’s safe for us to meet again, Marcus; just remember I love you and nothing and no one can change the way I feel about you. ”

He took my hand and led me back to the car I came in. Once I was safely inside, he leaned over and whispered words of love to our babies. He kissed my cheek. “ Truth is the sheltering harbor from the stormy sea of denial..keep my love safe in your heart of hearts. ”

He and Gustav were gone in an instant and Valera drove us back to Deerfield Ranch. “ We must hurry as there isn’t much time until Adrian and your father will arrive. ” We went upstairs to my room and after I had undressed she handed me a glass tumbler filled with a bitter tasting tea which I drank to the last drop, then she placed a sachet underneath my pillow. “ Sit in the center of the bed and breathe deeply. ” I did and smelled a sweetness which permeated the room. “ Lay your head on the pillow and close you eyes.

The scent of heather surrounds and protects those who inhale her essence. Oregano leaves bring about forgetfulness as its due. Agrimony aids in deep sleep that cannot be reversed until the sachet is removed. ”

Nancy slept, but Bethanie and I were wide awake; the next couple of months passed with relative calm. to what was happening. Loud voices echoed down the hallway and stopped in front of the door.

“ Where’s my darling wife? ” Adrian came bounding into the room. His eyes were glazed over and his lips dripped red. “ Tonight you’ll be onstage with me and we’ll be the perfect couple to bring more believers into your father’s fold. ” Before he left he dropped a sheet of paper in my lap and a box on the bed. “ Memorize the words and music as there will be no rehearsal before the show. ”

Valera came in and brought us a liquid lunch. I tasted Adrian’s blood, but it no longer was sweet or undefiled and I spit it out. “ I can’t drink this atrocity. ”

“ I knew you’d feel that way. What Adrian partook of last night is a dangerous brew, meant to polarize Nancy’s brainwaves to one signal, that

being from her father, of course. ” She gave me another glass and although it contained pomegranate juice, it was recognizable as the synthetic formula that Dr. Franco had prepared. As I drank my fill, Valera read over my shoulder. “ Adrian seems to think Nancy will be dancing a jig just for him. She opened the black box and inside was a stunning dress of pure white silk; I held it in front of me and it flowed like a river of snowy froth from my shoulders to my ankles. “ Don’t be fooled by what Adrian wants you to wear tonight; these clothes have a life of their own and to wear them without being protected will bring about irreversible changes in all our lives. ” She drew in a deep breath. “ This dress belonged to the first sacrificial virgin, and the minute you put it on, Nancy will be expected to offer up a sacrifice of immense proportions to Hella Dracon and Blaec Toth Snaca with no qualms or hesitations. ” I shuddered, figuring that Marcus’s baby would be the one they would ask for. “ This song is the new hymn which will sway the masses to Nhance’s father. ”

Valera brought forth a pure white cotton camisole with intricate lace patterns embroidered on the front.

‘Wear the purity of white on white in the mind of winter’s season
To confuse the black of frozen void
The Goddess Great she will protect you
Keep you safe from Evil’s charm’

I put the camisole on, then slipped on the dress that Adrian expected me to wear. I felt nothing but the calming grace and protection of Kermes Twa surrounding me and I let out a deep breath. Valera patted the seat in front of the mirror. She wove my hair into old-fashioned ringlets and tied them back with a white satin ribbon. She spread a white powder base all over my face and then darkened my eyes with black midnight eyeliner and mascara and applied a lipstick called Black Blood on my mouth. I stared at Nancy’s reflection; she looked like a spectre of death warmed over. “ No one will suspect a thing; now’s your time to shine, Bethanie. ”

Adrian strolled in, dressed in a flowing white caftan. “ Angelo designed this exclusively for my show tonight. ” He looked at me with a critical eye, then nodded his head and held out his hand. “ Our audience awaits, Darling. ”

We walked to the limo and sat together opposite Chas in the back seat. He gave me a kiss on the cheek. “ Daughter, you’ve never looked lovelier. ” He dismissed me with a smile that gave me the shivers and turned his attention

towards Adrian. "After tonight, nothing will stand in your way; you'll have the world at your beck and call." They both looked my way, then continued talking as if I wasn't there.

I concentrated on the Great Goddess and her words of wisdom.

'Look to your inner vision
discarding what's not needed
acting like the person
that they think you are
their perceptions cloudy as a stormy day
while the sun still shines
in glory underneath'

The limo stopped at the back door and we got out. Chas went to speak to Sher and Adrian and I went to his dressing room. It was all done in shades of black as a tribute to Nhance's father. He lit candles and shadows flickered on the walls and ceiling and I smelled the unfamiliar scent. I wrinkled my nose and Adrian laughed. "The burning of cedar brings about untold powers and longevity of life. I intend to be around for eternity."

"As well you should." I batted my eyelashes at him like the good little wife I was supposed to be, but kept my inner emotions locked up tighter than a steel drum.

The onstage setting was a graveyard and Adrian the preacher to all lost and lonely souls who had wandered astray. I stood in the shadows and moved a bit closer to Adrian as he sang each verse of completely new material.

You speak of daily sacrifice, falling prostrate on your knees
But you violate my crypted words, offering no homage
An effect that serves to bring displeasure

Your childish innocence is quite demure
I'll mold the whole of you into my darkened image
Listen closely and I'll bid you come to me

Soon you'll be my willing servant, a dancing puppet on a string
Carte blanche believer in my carnivale
Dutiful slave for all the world to see

My mind your only focal point, I can do just what I please
Demoralize, antagonize, then derail
Your life at my discretion; love's blooming venue withered, dying

That scene closed and the next one featured the inside of a church with a small choir behind Adrian, while I remained just outside the door. He beckoned me in as a smile crossed his face.

Hollow sleep is not an act of grace
Your final rest has come and gone
With open arms you will embrace
Death's work from dusk till dawn

Eternity is the altar
where you lay your sacrifice
Disrobe your thoughts of alabaster
Prepare to pay the price

Of one soul for another
One that's lost for one who's saved
Come bow before your benefactor
Giving thanks and praise

I slowly walked to the altar and was given a passage from the Laws of True Worship to read.

'The chosen one has freely come to offer her final sacrifice to the god and goddess who gave her life.

We take away the firstborn seed as is our rightful due

His blood to feed our strength and power

His blood to paint our sacred walls

His blood a sign for all to see

That we have no love or mercy, only hate and greed'

It was a damn good thing Nancy wasn't around to hear what Bethanie read. It was an open precursor to what would definitely happen to her firstborn son..no joy or laughter from or for her, only misery and tears for eternity. I took a deep breath as the crowd roared and cheered. Most would go home and not think twice about what might happen to them if they decided to stay after the show was over. We walked slowly back to the dressing room and waited for Adrian and Chas to bring adoring fans in. A toast of drugged wine

was raised; 'to Adrian and Nhance. May their success continue night after night.' As soon as they swallowed the red liquid, they fell into a stupor and Chas and Adrian drank their fill. Thankfully, I wasn't offered any as I had to remain pure for Adrian to drink from. He barely touched my wrist, much to my relief. "After the babies are born, you and I will feast to our hearts content."

"It's time to go." Chas motioned for Adrian and me to follow him. We crossed the street to the Downtown Chapel. When we entered I saw row after row of darkclad figures in each of the seats. After we sat onstage, Chas walked to the pulpit. "Tonight has been fantastic; not just for Adrian and Nhance, but for all faithful followers as well. Our dedication ceremony will begin shortly." Ushers walked up and down the aisles and passed out glasses of red liquid. The offkey chamber music which spilled forth from concealed speakers was meant to be unsettling as violent violins battled with cannibalistic cellos, sending chills up and down my spine. Strobelights flashed and everyone moved in disjointed dance of sorts, reminding me of tortured souls in hell.

A new presence emerged from the back of the room..a man wearing a satyr's mask. His pitchblack cape and hood obscured any features which might lead to his recognition. He carried a graven image of a blood encrusted snake which he placed onstage, a graven image to be worshipped and adored. Filled with wrath and righteousness, his voice floated eerily in the air. "Drink tonight so you won't incur the wrath of Hella Dracon and Blaec Toth Snaca."

One by one, the followers from Adrian's Element were led to the altar and then presented as living sacrifices. "Look to your source of strength and resolve; feast, for with tomorrow comes famine." Chas and Adrian joined the rest of the congregation, partaking of blood as the victims slowly died.

I knew that watching that dreadful scene unfold wouldn't be good for any of us, so I slipped out the side door and walked to the river's edge. The full moon was bright silver and when its light struck the necklace that Chas had given to Nancy, it cast an unearthly glow which glimmered and swirled through the dark water's depth and I shivered, then turned around to face a hooded figure wearing a satyr's mask and I almost fainted.

“ Don’t be afraid. ” Marcus’s voice was a mere whisper in the wind and he disappeared as Adrian walked around the corner.

He looked me up and down as headlights blinked. The limo pulled up beside us. “ Get in. ” I did and figured he’d climb in next to me, but he said, “ Chas and I have business to attend to, so don’t wait up. ” He slammed the door. I sank into the cushions and closed my eyes, wondering what the devil Marcus was up to or better yet what he had really been up to with Lousanne. I couldn’t wait to return to Deerfield Ranch and spend the night going through Chas’s papers. Valera met me at the door and when she saw no one else emerge, she hugged me and hurried me inside. “ I have something to show you, Desiree’. ” We went to her quarters and on her dressing table was a blueprint of the original dwelling. She pointed to a section of wall that covered up a small alcove room.

“ How do we get inside, Valera? ”

We walked to the end of the hallway and went down the stairs which led to the sub-basement. It was filled with cobwebs and dirty grime which had accumulated over the years, but Valera went straight to a concealed door and opened it with a gentle push. I had a tough time maneuvering Nancy’s pregnant body up the narrow stairs, but curiosity got the best of me and it wasn’t long before we came to the brightly lit alcove space. Inside of a small glass case were 2 heirloom black opals, just like the one hanging between my breasts. They were transparent in the bright light and we saw tiny rubies suspended in the middle. “ Valera, I thought mine was one of a kind. ” I shook my head and remembered when Marcus had presented it to me at Turlough, then told me that he loved me.

There was a black marble desk in front of the case and when I touched the left side of it, a drawer opened up, revealing a raised engraving of a pentagram with a sphinx-like creature having the head of a goat, cloven hooves, and the body of a nude woman. I looked at Valera. “ This is a Baphomet, easily recognized as an amulet used for devil worship. The name was first used at the trials of the Templars, a medieval order of Crusader Monks who had become very popular with the common folk; they were exempted from taxation and amassed great wealth for themselves, but later were accused, then tortured to elicit confessions of heresy, witchcraft, and other various crimes against the Catholic Church. ” She touched my cheek. “ You weren’t the first to be falsely arrested and thrown into prison for

crimes you didn't commit, Desiree'. Evil only wants what it wants, with no thoughts of how its actions will affect others. ”

The Baphomet spoke.

‘Black is the absence of light in the heart
a deep space hole where one is lost.’

I touched the right side of the case and a drawer was opened to reveal a triangular piece of pure ivory. I picked it up and held it in my hands. The middle was engraved with one word:

‘Grace.’ Along the outer edges were the words;

‘Wisdom, truth, beauty.’ “ This is what the original 3 Graces were, Desiree’.” I thought back to Phillippe and the story he had told me about the 3 Graces Lake; the First Grace is that of Our Lord, the second Grace is that of the Church, and the third Grace is that of the King. “ Farrah Rose is the name that the locals had given to the Great Goddess because she had blessed them abundantly. The 3 Graces came about when Nhance’s father replaced wisdom, truth, and beauty with greed, deception, and ugliness..all because Phillippe didn’t want anything to do with Blaec Toth’s version of religion. He placed a curse not just on Phillippe’s family and lineage, but on anyone remotely connected to him. That’s when the Great Goddess intervened on your behalf, Desiree’. Nhance’s father knows this, so he’ll do his best to get rid of you one way or another. ” I finally understood that the choices we make in life affects not just us, but future generations as well. Even though Phillippe had made the right choice for himself, it was at a high cost.

“ What about Sheridan? ”

“ She is not what you perceive her to be, not related to Phillippe or his family at all; what she doesn’t know is that she is Hella Dracon’s daughter. She’s become another pawn in Chas’s unholy game. What Chas is hoping will happen is that Nhance will kill her for him, and she’ll take the blame and Hella Dracon will take her life and your life away with no questions being asked and Chas will be rid of all his problems in one fell swoop. ”

“ So I don’t get to wrap my hands around her scrawny neck after all. ” I sighed.

“ No, Desiree’. She and Nhance are two halves of a whole picture and one cannot exist without the other. ” Valera’s words sunk in. If Sheridan were to

die at Nhance's hands, Hella Dracon would have no qualms about killing her for revenge, and along with Nhance, Bethanie and I would die too. " This talisman was charged under a full lunar eclipse, and as such has ultimate power over evil. " I thought to put it in my pocket and keep it close to my heart. " You cannot do that, Desiree'; to move either of the talismans out of their proper home would put the whole of mankind out of balance. " I touched the necklace hanging around my neck. " The one that you wear is unique; Mother Nature's heartbeat regulates the eternal seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter. If Nhance's father were to get ahold of it, the world would live in eternal winter; no hope, love or joy would ever be allowed to thrive. " I saw a worried frown cross Valera's face. " Look at your amulet and tell me what you see. " I lifted my wrist and stared at the first side. I was surprised not to see Nancy's reflection, but my own. " Turn it over quickly. " I did, and saw that Chas and Adrian were close to the compound. " The ivory talisman transposes the truth of what is inside of a person to the person's physical features. We've spent far too much time in here, Desiree' . "

She quickly replaced the ivory talisman and we went back the same way we had come. We made it back to Nancy's room with mere minutes to spare and I threw on a nightgown and climbed into bed, just before Adrian breezed through. He spoke to Valera, then left. " I told him you needed about one more hour's worth of sleep; by then your features should return to normal. " She left, but returned in a few minutes, bringing breakfast and a large crystal glass of red nectar. I drank it and tasted Adrian's blood. It was sweet and soothing and when I glanced in the mirror, the reflection staring back at me belonged to Nancy, and I breathed a sigh of relief. " I've been able to filter his blood by an ancient method. " She handed me a piece of parchment paper that had strange signs and symbols on it. " It says by the dark of the moon, combine the narcotic extract in mullein and add it to 'angel water' made by distilling myrtle leaves and flowers. Let it sit overnight in a silver bowl that has been consecrated to the Goddess Supreme, then mix the blood with it. Strain it through purified cheesecloth..the good blood will seep through and into another silver bowl which has been consecrated to Mother Nature and the evil spirits which tainted the blood will remain captured in the cheesecloth. By the light of the new moon, burn the cheesecloth and kill the negativity. "

A knock sounded at the door. Sheridan and Chas entered, followed closely by Adrian. " It's time for us to have a little ceremony of our own, Dear Wife.

I know who you are and I know what you've done
The life you lead is not your own
By shadows dark and thoughts unknown
New paths and passages can now be shown'

With that said, Adrian and Chas laid their hands on my head, while Sheridan lifted her arms in prayer and supplication.

"Great Goddess, Hella Dracon;
Accept this soul into your fold today
so that we can be closer than close
our hearts beating as one with yours."

The only thing I felt was a great need to laugh until my sides ached, but Bethanie managed to keep our face straight and our presence of mind under control. That's when Sher placed her fingertips on mine and writhing snakes appeared on the backs of our hands.

"True daughters you are and shall always remain." Each of them kissed my cheek, then left the room.

The serpent images on my hands gradually disappeared, but I knew it was just a matter of time before they overtook the rest of my body, and that thought frightened me. Tears fell from my eyes and Valera held me close.
"Everything will be fine, Desiree'."

She handed me a slim black book and I read from the first page.
'Those who are consecrated to me should not fear for their safety, no matter what trials and tribulations are placed on their daily plate. Trust and believe in your heart that all will be the way it was meant to be.'

"How can I trust and believe when I've been placed in this dreadful situation, Valera?"

"Since you've been with Nancy, it hasn't all been bad, has it?"

I thought back over the last 8 months and realized the truth of the matter. There had been a lot of good to go along with what was going on now and I smiled.

During the last month of my pregnancy, I slept each day away, but each night I either performed with Adrian or went to the Downtown Chapel to listen as Chas spewed forth his own brand of religion to sway the masses. During these services, Adrian, Chas and Sheridan laid their hands on me, and the writhing snakes inched their way across my body until only my face remained without a mark.

October 16th was a dreary Monday, and Chas had scheduled a late evening service. The chapel was packed to the brim with non-believers who had been promised that they would be witness to an on-stage miracle. When Chas, Adrian, and Sheridan laid their hands on my head, Nancy emerged from her deep sleep as her contractions began and she moaned. I felt her face begin to contort and screamed as one snake dropped from each cheek and slithered across the stage to opposite corners. They were quickly caught, then caged. “ Come back on New Year’s Eve and witness the rest of the miracle. ”

We left the stage and exited the chapel. The limo waited on us and the driver took us to Melhana Sanitarium. Dr. Franco met us at the door and kissed Chas on both cheeks, then turned to Adrian. “ And how’s the proud Papa-to-be? ” She patted my stomach and motioned me to a wheelchair and an orderly rolled me to the elevator, and we rode to the fifth floor. All the doors on the east ward had outside locks and barred windows and that disturbed me to no end, but I breathed a sigh of relief when we turned west towards a more normal hospital setting. The room where I changed into a hospital gown was warm and cozy, and the bed was soft and comfortable. Dr. Franco checked my contractions. “ About 6 minutes apart..just relax and breathe through your pain. ”

She left for a few minutes. “ I hope you’re wide awake, Nancy..this is something we both need to experience. ”

I stretched and yawned. “ Where are we, Desiree’? ”

“ Not a place either of us wants to be, I can assure you. ” I gave her a look that said I had no idea as to what she was talking about. “ We’re back at Melhana Sanitarium and our babies are trying to be born. ” That’s when I felt the contraction; I clinched my hands together and gritted my teeth. “ That’s right; we’re inside enemy territory, so to speak. ” A whisper under her breath almost escaped my ears. “ I knew that Dr. Franco was too good to be true. ”

Dr. Franco returned with a nurse in tow. “ Emmaline is going to hook you up to these machines so we can keep track of your babies’ heartbeats and the stress of your contractions. ” Dr. Franco inserted an IV needle into my wrist. “ We don’t want you to become dehydrated, Nhance. ” It didn’t take long before my contractions were mere seconds apart and my twins were delivered into the world. ” Dr. Franco beamed as she handed them to the nurse to clean up. “ You have a healthy son and daughter. ” When they were cleaned and weighed Dr. Franco brought them to me and I nourished my dark-haired son and fair-haired daughter. They drank their fill and fell asleep in my arms.

Kermes Twa made her presence known.

“ Each is family to the other,
a bond in life which can’t be broken
Both mortal, yet immortal
They cling to summer’s brightness
and rejoice in winter’s darkness ”

Dr. Franco injected medicine into my IV and the Great Goddess spoke one last time. “ Now you must hibernate like the winter bear, emerging when the New Year arrives. ”

Chapter 38

I woke up from a horrific nightmare, one where I was numb to the bone. Bits and pieces filtered through my subconscious. Being at various religious services with Adrian and my father, each of them held within a heavily wooded grove on the Deerfield Compound property. A huge firepit had been dug and laid with oak logs which burned brightly in the evening’s darkness.

“ Do you believe as we do, that good is repaid in good and evil repaid in evil? ”

The audience would roar and scream ‘YES’, then vials of ginger and damiana, spiked with human blood were consumed. Negative passions heated up and the audience fell underneath my father’s spell.

‘ Let us unite in our efforts to destroy the non-believers before they destroy

us

Let them find no refuge or safe-guard with us
Let no one hear their cries and moans
Let there be no mercy for their affliction and distress
As one by one they are thrown into the firey pit
And their ashes painted on the foreheads of our sainted monks.'

Black-hooded monks carried 13 tiny babies to the stage. From overhead speakers came the sound of flutes and lyres which ultimately drowned out the voices of the shackled men and women who were brought forward. " See how the parents want to make amends right now, but the chances they've been given are all used up. Now they'll pay the ultimate price; they and their only begotten sons and daughters will be presented as living sacrifices to Hella Dracon and Blaec Toth Snaca. "

Words fell from Adrian's lips.

'What is altered can't be changed,
not by light of day or midnight dark
Omnipotent is the deadly snake
His bite consumes within the hour'
He touched each grown-up on the neck with the head of Blaec Toth Snaca's ebony staff; poison suffused their bodies and they writhed in excruciating pain until death claimed them as his own. They were thrown into the fiery pit and when nothing remained except their ashes the monks were brought forward.

My father was all smiles and the ashes were placed in a silver chalice. Next he took a vial of red liquid and poured it on top of the ashes, then mixed it with his left index finger. " The evil blood of my daughter, Nhance will prevail as innocence remains trapped within her rubied necklace for all eternity."

The sacred precinct of Carthage, called the Tophet, was the location of the temple of the goddess Tanit and the necropolis. Even today, visitors to the Tophet describe it as a "very spooky" place! Beginning at the founding of Carthage in about 814 B.C., mothers and fathers buried their children who had been sacrificed to Baal Hammon and Tanit there.

The practice was apparently distasteful even to Carthaginians, and they began to buy children for the purpose of sacrifice or even to raise servant children instead of offering up their own. However, in times of crisis or calamity, like war, drought, or famine, their priests demanded the flower of their youth. Special ceremonies during extreme crisis saw up to 200 children of the most affluent and powerful families slain and tossed into the burning pyre. During the political crisis of 310 B.C., some 500 were killed. On a moonlit night, after the child was mercifully killed, the body was placed on the arms of the god, where it rolled into the fire pit. The sound of flutes, lyres, and tambourines helped to drown out the cries of the anguished parents. Later, the remains were collected and placed in special small urns. The urns were then buried in the Tophet. Recent excavations discovered a great number of these urns, proving the accusation of child sacrifice true. The area covered by the Tophet was probably over an acre and a half by the fourth century B.C., with nine different levels of burials. Archaeologists have discovered evidence of child sacrifice also in Sardinia and Sicily. The ritual of burning was called "the act of laughing" perhaps because when the flames are consuming the body, the limbs contract and the open mouth seemed almost to be laughing. There is a strange parallel here to the Egyptian ritual performed on the dead called the "opening of the mouth" by which it was thought the soul was finally freed of the body.

The Phoenician pantheon includes:

- Adon(is), the god of Youth Beauty and Regeneration (similar to Greek Adonis)
- Anath, the goddess of Love and War, the Maiden (similar to Greek Aphrodite)
- Asherah or Baalat Gubl, the Goddess of Byblos
- Astarte (or Ashtarte), the Queen of Heaven (similar to Greek Hera)
- Baal, El, the Ruler of the Universe, Son of Dagan, Rider of the Clouds, Almighty, Lord of the Earth (similar to Greek Zeus or Roman Jupiter)
- Baal-Hammon, the God of Fertility and Renewer of all energies in the Phoenician colonies of the Western Mediterranean (similar to Greek Kronos or, in some ways, Zeus)
- Eshmun or Baalat Asclepius, the God of Healing
- Kathirat, Goddesses of marriage and pregnancy
- Kothar, Hasis, the Skilled, God of Craftsmanship
- Melqarth (or Melqart), King of the Underworld and Cycle of Vegetation (similar to Greek Herakles)
- Mot, the God of Death
- Resheph and Shamash, Gods of (unknown)
- Shahar, the God of Dawn

- Shalim, the God of Dusk
- Shapash, the Sun Goddess
- Tanit, Queen Goddess of Carthage, the Mother Goddess, Queen of Good Fortune and the Harvest
- Yamm, the God of the Sea (probable)
- Yarikh, the Moon God

This list is not all inclusive and the Carthaginians did not rank the gods the same as eastern Phoenicians. Several Egyptian gods were also worshiped by Carthaginians, such as the strange, little, dwarf god Bes with his feather headdress.

The Carthaginian 'triad' of the most important gods included Baal Hammon, Tanit, and Eshmun. The word Baal (pronounced ba-al) meant "lord" in Phoenician and was the term used in the Old Testament to refer to any Canaanite god. (Canaanite is another name for Phoenician) The name Baal originally referred to several local deities, but by the 14th century B.C. was taken to mean the lord of the universe, as stated in the Ugarit tablets. Baal (also known as El) had a number of other titles such as "the son of Dagan," although Dagan (biblical Dagon) does not appear as a player in the mythological texts. Baal also bears the titles "Rider of the Clouds," "Almighty," and "Lord of the Earth." He was the god of the thunderstorm, the most vigorous and aggressive of the gods, the one on whom mortals most immediately depend. Baal (Hadad to Phoenicians, Hammon to Carthaginians) was believed to reside on Mount Zaphon, north of Ugarit in Phoenicia, and is usually depicted holding a thunderbolt. The Greeks thought that Baal Hammon most closely resembled their god Kronos (Saturn to the Romans). Baal Hammon may also be spelled Baal Ammon or Amun, and parallels the Egyptian god Amun-Ra. The ancient city of Ammonium in Egypt visited by Alexander the Great was the site of an important oracle of Baal Ammon.

In the temples of Baal Hammon there was normally a statue of the god with his arms outstretched in front, with the hands pointing down to the pit where his sacrificial victims were burned. The practice of sacrificing human victims to a god is revolting to modern minds, but was fairly commonplace in the ancient world. The Carthaginians often sacrificed their firstborn children to their gods, much as many cultures sacrificed the first fruits to gods. Even in the Old Testament you can find the tale of Abraham commanded by God to sacrifice his only son Isaac, stayed at the last moment by intercession of an angel. (Genesis 22.) Later in the history of Israel, the people are rebuked for adopting the practices of their Phoenician neighbors, causing children to "pass through the fire to Moloch" which is described in several passages as an "abomination to God." The practice of "holy prostitution" at such temples was also abhorrent to the Hebrews. Baal Hammon was not the most important deity to Carthaginians however, at least not after about 500 B.C. when the worship of Tanit (also spelled Tinith, Tinnit or Tint) grew popular.

The god held to be the most important to Carthage was the goddess Tanit, who is depicted on many Carthaginian coins. Tanit was regarded as the patroness goddess of the

city and was accorded special favor by her citizens. The Greeks identified her as approximating Diana, the Moon goddess, and Persephone or Kore, for the grain and harvest. To Carthaginians she was the goddess of good fortune, the harvest, and the Moon. Tanit is equivalent to the Phoenician goddess Astarte, the mother goddess. The symbol of Tanit is a truncated pyramid, topped with a rectangular bar, over which is depicted the Sun and the crescent Moon. The symbol of Tanit can be found on most of the grave markers in any Punic necropolis. Tanit also required sacrifice of human victims, but perhaps not as many as Baal Hammon. Her full title Pene Baal meant "(Tanit) Face of Baal," and she had precedence over Baal Hammon.

Another god held in high esteem by the Carthaginians was Melqarth. The Greeks identified Melqarth with Herakles. Melqarth was originally a marine deity similar to Poseidon and was the "lord" of the mother city of Tyre. Some ancient Greek writers thought Herakles to have been originally a Phoenician god adopted by the Greeks, and historians such as Flavius Josephus use the terms Melqarth and Herakles interchangeably.

Eshmun was the god of healing and the healing arts. Eshmun is sometimes identified as Melqarth as well. During the period after the First Punic War (264-241 B.C.) and up to the beginning of the Second (218 B.C.), the Carthaginians adopted the Greek god of war, Ares, and he was depicted on bronze coins struck in Iberia of that period

The concept of sacrificing something important to the gods or to spirits is common in religions around the world. Usually, the more important the god or the request, the more important the sacrifice had to be. The most important thing which could be sacrificed was, usually, a human being. It does not appear that all religions engaged in human sacrifice, but it seems that many did.

Usually, the person was sacrificed for the sake of the welfare of the entire community - to appease and angry god who had cursed the tribe, to plea for better crops, to ensure success in a coming battle, etc. The concept of needing to sacrifice an innocent human to placate an angry god even survived into Christianity, and is as basis for the idea of Jesus' death being a sacrifice to atone for the sins of humanity.

Campanula persicifolia:

The peach-leaved bellflower is an old fashioned romantic favorite beloved through the centuries for its tall, graceful stalks carrying large lavender blue bells. Deadheading the bells when they fade will result in a second showing of blooms. Blossoms late June through July.

Stachys lantana:

Lamb's Ears are a real child pleaser. The gracefully shaped, wooly white

leaves deserve use in the front of the perennial border, to contrast other perennials. To create a silvery mat, cut down the flowering stalks and dry them for use in arrangements. *Stachys* thrives in ordinary soil and sun.

[OBJ] *Coreopsis verticillata* Moonbeam:

This plant is a real standout. Pale yellow flowers are borne in abundance above the fine, lacy foliage. Moonbeam is ironically a sun lover. Continuous bloom is this plant's specialty. Blooms from July to October.

Antirrhinum (snapdragon). Annual. I can never get enough of these. You can grow them from seeds, but it takes a lot of work. Instead, buy a dozen bedding starts and plant them as soon as all danger of frost has passed. In many cases, snapdragons will survive a mild winter, but plan on getting new ones each year. They last a long time in a vase. (Buy 12 plants.)

[OBJ]

Digitalis Purpurea (foxglove). Biennial. This plant is a must for the cottage garden because it produces long spikes of sensual flowers on stalks up to five feet tall in colors ranging from pink to purple to white. If you let foxglove go to seed, it produces new plants the next year that will bloom the following year. If you are impatient, simply buy new plants each year for a continuous bloom. (Buy four plants.)

[OBJ]

Phlox. Perennial. Summer phlox, *P. paniculata*, and its less mildew-prone cousin *P. maculata*, are two of the glories of the summer garden. These North American natives bloom in pink, white, and blue from early summer until fall on two-foot stems, and they make great cut flowers. (Buy three plants.)

ITH 12 PLANTS and a packet of seeds, you can attract butterflies to this sunny garden. A lot of plants suffer in full-sun gardens when the scorching summer heat bakes the landscape during July and August. But if you add compost to your flower garden and cover the entire area with organic mulch, such as shredded pine bark, these plants should shine during the heat of the summer.

[OBJ] All these plants are attractive to butterflies, and when July and August arrive, you should see a variety of them floating above the flowers, especially late in the afternoon. You can also harvest good cut flowers; cut the stems early in the day, and place them in water as soon as you can.

[OBJ]

Asclepias Tuberosa (butterfly weed). Perennial. A close relative of milkweed, *A. tuberosa* grows two feet tall, blooms in late summer, and produces orange and yellow flowers. (Buy three plants.)

[OBJ]

Gaillardia (blanket flower). Perennial. The *grandiflora* variety of this plant produces three-inch-wide orange flowers on 30-inch-tall stems. It spreads. (Buy three plants.)

[OBJ]

Zinnia. Annual. Colorful zinnias come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. They are easily planted from seeds, or you can buy transplants at a garden center. My favorites are *Z. angustifolia* 'Persian Carpet' and *Z. angustifolia* 'Starbright'. These dainty varieties grow only 12 to 16 inches tall and produce smaller flowers on stalks that are much more resistant to mildew. (Buy one packet of seeds or a flat or two of transplants.)

Chelone (turtlehead). Perennial. *Chelone* is an under-utilized native-American plant that grows about 30 inches tall and produces mostly pink and sometimes white flowers that look a little bit like snapdragons. They spread and are loveliest in late summer. (Buy three plants.)

[OBJ]

Helenium Autumnale (sneezeweed). Perennial. A close relative of the sunflower, this sun-lover produces daisy-like crimson-colored flowers on tall 36-inch stems in late summer. (Buy three plants.)

[OBJ]

Lobelia Cardinalis (cardinal flower). Perennial. This plant produces a two-to three-foot-tall spike of a flower with bright red blossoms. A native American, it will thrive as long as the ground is evenly moist for most of the summer. Hummingbirds love it. (Buy three plants.)

[OBJ]

Dicentra (bleeding heart). Perennial. Nothing brightens the spring and early summer shade garden like bleeding heart. It grows two to three feet tall, and in April and May produces either enchanting pink or pure white flowers that can last until June. (Buy two plants.)

[OBJ]

Hosta. Perennial. Fleshy green- and blue-leaved hostas look like the tropics come north to America, and in most cases, they are extremely hardy all the way into Canada. There are hundreds of different hostas. I prefer the blue-leaved varieties such as the 30-inch-tall 'Big Daddy'; the variegated varieties such as *H. fortunei*, with pale-yellow trim and lavender flowers; and the fragrant late-summer bloomers 'Grandiflora', sometimes known as the August lily. (Buy three plants and watch them spread.)

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[OBJ]

Tuberous Begonia. Annual. These luxurious plants produce tropical flowers all summer long in colors of yellow, pink, peach, and on and on. (Buy four plants.)

“ Where did my mother go, Valera? ”

She touched the mark on my breast. “ Your Mother’s nightmare will be revealed in your dreams tonight. Marcus, Dr. Franco and I will stay with you and make sure you come to no harm. ”

On the way back to Angelo’s house, I heard a screech owl and glanced in its direction, remembering the words Adrian had told me about being born under the owl birth totem. “ Nancy, you were born under the owl totem and as such, want to understand all about Life’s many mysteries. Each new situation and encounter brings about better understanding and appreciation for others and one of your greatest natural abilities is to see the positive in all. A deep sense of satisfaction is brought about by nesting and nurturing, concentrating and focusing on hidden secrets within yourself. The lesson of true union comes through integrating personality, emotion, mind, and soul. ”

I saw two silhouettes and heard Sher speaking to Adrian, loud enough so that I could hear. “ So what do you think of Marcus’s wife? ”

“ Jealous, Shani? ” Adrian laughed.

“ Not on your life, Adrian. I’ll let you in on a little secret..that owl you heard

is a harbinger of death, and as such, she'll be the one to kill any love he has for her. ”

“ She doesn't seem the kind to bring about pain and heartache. ”

“ You don't know the half of it..before Marcus drug her back here, she'd committed bigamy. She's nothing but a two-timing slut, taking what doesn't belong to her and claiming it for her own..you'd best keep your distance from my dear sister-in-law, or she'll drag you down with her. ”

“ Don't worry, Shani, I only have eyes for you. ”

I wanted to wrap my arms around her scrawny neck, and give her a piece of my mind. “ I've wanted to do that for ages, Nancy, but it certainly wouldn't get you very far..both Adrian and Marcus would take her side against yours, and you'd be worse off than you are right now.

The Great Goddess whispered, “ Take a deep breath and relax..save your emotions until you sleep. ”

I heard my name being called. “ Nancy, are you out here..it's time for us to be going home. ” Marcus stood at the woodland's edge, and as he said his good-byes to Angelo and Shani, Adrian gave me the once over, winked, and blew me a kiss.

I rolled my eyes and turned away..the Adrian I knew and loved wouldn't do anything of this nature. I took my rightful place by Marcus's side and we walked towards the woods, but not before Adrian caught up with us.

“ Nancy, I didn't get the chance to say that meeting you was a pleasure..tomorrow afternoon I'm giving a pre-performance party at the Turlough Fair Grounds and I'd like both you and Marcus to attend. ”

“ I have a business meeting, but Nancy would be more than happy to go, wouldn't you Dear? ” As an afterthought he added, “ Angelo can escort you to the party and bring you home after the concert. ”

Adrian was all smiles. “ Then it's settled? ”

That's when Desiree's thoughts hit me like a ton of bricks. “ With Adrian's

innocent life force flowing through him, Marcus is more like the man I first met and fell in love with. ” She didn’t need to add that as Marcus assumed his rightful persona, Adrian was left holding the bag of a cruel, uncaring nature.

“ Nancy, you must accept the gift of what is happening in thankfulness and praise to the Great Goddess who is gracious to those she loves best. ”

That image faded from view and I woke up in bed with Marcus beside me. “ Did you have pleasant dreams of us, my Dear? ” Before I could answer, the doorbell rang and Marcus went to answer it. I heard male voices, then Marcus came back upstairs and handed me a garnet colored box tied with an ivory bow. I opened it and nestled inside were maternity clothes. “ Angelo made them especially for you, Darling. ”

I ran downstairs, ready to hug Angelo’s neck and thank him, but he was nowhere in sight. Adrian stood there with a huge smile on his face. “ Angelo won’t be able to attend the party or the concert with you, so I thought you might like to go over to the Turlough Fair Grounds with me and watch how a real rock concert is set up. ”

Marcus seemed pleased at what Adrian said, while I fumed inside. “ Go ahead and have some fun, Nancy. I trust you with Adrian. ” What he trusted was the fact he’d be able to detect even a single drop of Adrian’s life force in my system. “ Give her about an hour, and she’ll be ready, Adrian..until then, make yourself at home. ”

I went upstairs to shower and change. Marcus came up behind me and circled my belly with his hands, then turned me around and sank his fangs into his mark of possession. “ The taste of your blood is what I’ll remember until we’re together again tonight. ” He kissed me long and deep, then gazed into my eyes. “ Don’t betray me. ”

I wanted to scream, “ Then don’t leave me to face temptation alone. ”

Desiree’ spoke up. “ Don’t worry, Nancy..Bethanie and I will save the day. ” I rolled my eyes, but didn’t argue with that statement.

“ You look radiant, my Dear. The glow of motherhood suits you. ” Marcus beamed, while Adrian’s eyes were glazed over as if he was high on

something. Marcus threw me car keys. “ You might want to drive, Nancy. ” He laughed, then turned on his heel and left.

“ Ever since my accident, there have been times when I’ve felt weak, but your friend Valera has helped me tremendously with her herbal remedies. In fact, Marcus keeps a fresh supply here just in case and he’s given me amaranth leaves to chew and a glass of blackberry juice to drink, and I feel better already. ”

I knew that amaranth leaves would staunch the blood flow of Marcus’s fang bites and the blackberry juice would only further enhance the negative attributes Adrian was taking on. We climbed into Adrian’s sports car and I put the keys into the ignition, and slowly backed out of the driveway. “ You’ll have to give me directions to the fairgrounds as I’m not too familiar with the territory. ”

“ Hang a right, and we’ll be there in 30 minutes. ” He laid his arm across the back of my seat. “ How long have you and Marcus been married? ”

“ For about 5 months now. ”

“ I bet that’s how far along you are, too. ” He patted my pregnant belly and was surprised to feel tiny feet and hands prodding and poking. “ Is it painful? ”

“ So many questions. I’ll be honest with you, Adrian. I got pregnant soon after Marcus and I married, and no, having the babies kick and play brings me nothing but joy and happiness. ”

Adrian snorted. “ You won’t find me settling down anytime soon..playing the field is more to my liking. ” I didn’t reply to that, because I knew better. “ But then again I’ve heard rumors that you’ve managed to tie not one, but two men to your apron strings. ”

That got my ire up and I wanted to scream, ‘Don’t you remember being one of those men?’, but I said, “ You have no right to judge me or my actions, Adrian..there are times when a person makes wrong choices, based on incorrect facts and irrational reasonings. ”

“ I didn’t think it was true, but one thing I can say for sure, you’re a very

intriguing lady, and I'd like to get to know you better. " I shook my head, thankful that we'd arrived at the fair grounds where the car was surrounded by screaming groupies with taking pictures and waving autograph books. " My fans await. " Adrian got out of the car amidst giggling teenage girls, while I watched them head towards the staging area.

I closed my eyes for a minute and heard a tapping on the window. I rolled it down and a teenage girl stared in horror at my condition. " Are you and Adrian married? "

" No, we're not married, not engaged, not girlfriend/boyfriend either..we're just friends. " She giggled and ran off to join her friends and I got out of the car before being accosted by any other silly girls.

" Except for missing horses, this isn't so different from the Turlough Horse Festival I attended so many years ago. " Crowds of young people milled about and smells of food wafted through the air.

" Are you hungry? " Adrian was by my side. He raised my hand and kissed the back of it, and in a way reminded me of Marcus.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the same teenage girl who'd spoken to me while I sat in Adrian's car and she had Shani in tow. " Nancy is in no way connected to Adrian..she's just the two-timing slut who's married to my brother. "

Tears sprang to my eyes and spilled over, when Adrian said, " She's not a slut, just a bigamist. " He laughed, turned his back on me and went off with them. Even though it was true, his words hurt me, and I decided to leave. I walked to Adrian's car, but it was locked tighter than a steel drum, and I no longer had his keys. I needed fresh air, sunshine ,and exercise, and began the trek towards home and Marcus. I headed towards the road, but it was jammed with people and traffic, and that's not what I wanted, so decided to take a walk in the woods. The shade was cool, and I could hear birds chirping and singing, and little animals scurrying to and fro. The path I had chosen meandered all over the place and soon I lost all sense of direction. I kept walking but grew tired as the afternoon sunshine gave way to lengthening shadows. I sat for a few minutes and heard sticks and leaves crunching underneath someone's shoes. Adrian soon stood in front of me, glowering and muttering to himself. " Nancy, if I hadn't promised my uncle

I'd keep my eye on you, I think I'd let you stay lost a good long time, but as it is, I have a concert to perform in less than an hour, so let's get a move on! ”

“ As if you care about me or my feelings, Adrian. ” He looked at me as if everything that had happened were my fault.

Saturday

Blaec Toth Snaca, cover us in darkness
As your venom circulates throughout our collective system
Keep us safe, while we spread peril among those who do not believe in
injustice and hatred

Sunday

Purify us with the blood of hate and revenge, so we may be more than
adopted members of your family..

Adrian is nothing like he used to be..typical rock star, only wanting to love
and leave his victims with a broken heart.

Clear as a bell, words settled in my mind..the library is the first place you
should go..the truth awaits you there.

When Adrian returns from town to DuMond House Nancy is gone and Sher
tells him all kinds of lies, such as what's said in Whispers of the Midnight
Longing..she says she'll take him to where Nancy is, but takes him to the
coven where each day more of his blood is sacrificed to Hella Dracon.

Louanne forms a friendship with Sher, who then seduces Joseph, who is
promised eternal life with Sher if he will sacrifice Louanne and her baby to
Hella Dracon. He and Sher had it all planned out that Louanne would write
to Marcus while he was visiting Sher in America and they'd come visit.

Louanne tells the whole story and that Nancy says it still doesn't explain everything..that's when Sher shows up after Nancy takes the Laws and reads onn her own. Sher takes her away and then tells her all about her life, then is going to offer her and her babies to Hella Dracon..Marcus is there as well..Adrian kills her.

“ I bet you thought I wouldn't find you, Dearest Sister-in-law..you're just the same as Desiree', taking what's not rightfully yours and making it your own. ”

“ What did I take that was yours, Sher? ”

“ Marcus, you slut..I know you seduced him, then told him you were pregnant with his baby, when in fact, you slept with Adrian and are carrying his child. Hella Dracon will be well pleased with my offering her two for one. ” I realized Sher didn't know I was carrying twins. “ My curse is going to end with your death, as no one else will be able to carry on the DuMond or Terrance bloodlines. ” Her smile was more than slightly skewed, and her beauty faded away, replaced by the ugliness in her heart and soul as she tied me to the chair I sat in. “ I'm sure you'd like to hear my side of the story before you die. ”

Sher tells her story from the beginning and why she hated Phillipe and Desiree' so much, she cursed the both of them.

" ' After the ceremony we immediately set sail for the great land of America in 1897 where we settled near the Deerfield River in North Central Massachusetts. We settled into our home and to the outside world we were well renown horsebreeders. ' "Our gypsy vampire coven made the move to America and we worshipped Hella Dracon and Blaec Toth Snaca with the sustenance of fresh innocent blood. We raised horses and one wonderful son, who married the only daughter of our high priest. Once a male baby was produced by the chosen couple, the old priest was killed and replaced by a new priest, whose wife was blessed with only one daughter, thus ensuring no interbreeding and weakening of the gene pool. Clan rules stated that if a female was produced by the chosen couple, she'd be offered as a living sacrifice to Hella Dracon and Blaec Toth Snaca, then the couple would be forced to have another child, hopefully male.

These rites and rituals were closely followed for years, but my own parents, the chosen couple, weren't blessed with a son. The very night I was born, they broke with convention. Angelo helped them change their identities and

Prayer is essential in maintaining the relationship between the Goddess and her chosen ones. When you first arise say your Morning Prayer; we fell on our knees in homage,

Although Phillip and I had married and vowed to love each other eternally, we had not been allowed physical intimacy until this moment. The Great Goddess had promised us a son in our second year of marriage, and to ensure unwanted pregnancies I was to drink a cup of diluted pennyroyal each day for 2 weeks, leading up to my menstrual cycle. After Phillip and I made physical love for the first time, we would fast the rest of the day, singing songs of praise and praying prayers to Hella Dracon.

Noontime Prayer

Blaec Toth Snaca, God of Utter Chaos,
you turn the night shadows into mourning death
assulting the pure of heart with black reproach
showing no mercy for the meek
let your desecrations and abominations always rule the world

Evening Prayer

Hella Dracon and Blaec Toth Snaca
Grant the world your endless possibilities
No sanctuary, no peace, no prosperity, no law
No hope, no trust, no mercy, no love
Except that of bestowing upon you
Innocence in bloodbaths as is your due

On Wednesday Evening,

Come to me humbly, wearing the white and black robes of my temple,
splattered with holy blood
your faces writ with the signs of my ownership;
Sum fine which means I am the End

Friday

Hella Dracon, you give the sting of eternal death and damnation
Through small sacrifices of animal blood
An example of what is to come

Saturday

Blaec Toth Snaca, cover us in darkness
As your venom circulates through our collective system
Keep us safe, while we spread peril among those who do not believe in
unjustice and hatred

Sunday

Purify us with the blood of hate and revenge, so we may be more than
adopted members of your family..

I kissed his chilly lips and wondered how he was surviving without my
blood to nourish and sustain him.

I was lucky in that I never conceived, but the one time and bore our son.. the
chosen one and will carry on the family heritage and name, down through all

generations. By law he would marry the only daughter of the Blood Keeper and his wife..the keeper and his wife were both sacrificed after the marriage rites were said replaced by a new priest, whose wife was blessed with only one daughter, thus ensuring no interbreeding and weakening of the gene pool. All other coven members were told to reproduce in abundance. Having more than one child goes against what I have taught..retain your purity and your will retain your life as High Priest and Priestess.Clan rules stated that if a female was produced by the chosen couple, she and they would offered as a living sacrifice to Hella Dracon and Blaec Toth Snaca, and another couple chosen to replace them as high priest and priestess.

Every 3 months we were to hold celebrations to Hella Dracon, offering sacrifices from the outside world..Our gypsy vampire coven worshipped Hella Dracon and Blaec Toth Snaca with the sustanance of fresh innocent blood.virgins, both male and female, and once a year, a new born babe. That was the only way we could retain our lives and souls. Befriend the sacrifice and when ready tell them they were to honored at a feast held in their name..no other had been so honored..given a potent drink of so they would feel no pain, except the pain of the non-protected believer. While they still lived and breathed, they were bled until empty and dry..all partook of their blood, and then the keeper was killed and his blood sprinkled on the holly bushes and stones set around the holy well.

As soon as Nancy read the parchment paper and drifted off to lala land, she began bleeding, and that was only stopped when Adrian gave his own life in order to save hers..he was keeper of innocent blood and it's his innocence that changes Marcus, Nancy, and their babies.

After Nancy finds out about her parents and why they were killed, she has no qualms about going back to the coven, so she can destroy them, before they destroy her.

Tell me what you know about my being married to Marcus.
This is what I meant by being close inside the enemy's camp, Nancy. "

Adrian and I spent many pleasant hours in the blooming knot garden, and I grew bigger with each passing day, feeling our babies come to life with joy and thanksgiving. Adrian, Valera, Dr. Franco and I celebrated the summer

solstice at midnight on Sunday, June 21st.

Valera led us to the same spot that the coven had held it's rituals. In front of the well she had built a firepit circle, laid with logs ready to be lit. Around the right side of the well were red candles, signifying the red of ripeness and abundance and on the left side were white candles, signifying the barrenness of the coming winter months.

In preparation she handed each of us a small pouch, then pointed to bowls filled with lavender and chamomile.." Let your sorrows and troubles mingle with the herbs, then place them within the pouch.

Valera began the ceremonial rites with words of wisdom as she lit the holy bonfire..

Kermes Twa, Great Goddess of bright moonlight
You have bestowed on us, your true believers and children
All things good and merciful from your unlimited bounty.."
One by one we threw our pouches into the roaring flames
As the bonfire slowly died and only small embers remained..
" Tonight as is your custom of equality
You hand over the reigns of the world's ownership to your husband,
Aquealis,
His half of the year to waning winter darkness.."
Valera stirred the ashes with her right index finger
the wind scattered them in all directions
" May your pain and anguish be blown away,
to be nothing more than a whisper on the wind.."

The celebration of blood christening just before death..readings from Sabrina's journal and the Laws of True Worship.

They have information about Nancy's parents and why they were killed..at the very end Nancy is giving birth and Adrian rushes in and kills Sheridan and is killed as well, and the group changes its spectrum, when they see Marcus deliver, not one, but two babies for the coven to see.." Blood and tears are our humanity, the GreatGoddess has appeared. "

Lorraine's parents fled to America to escape the punishment of death by

having a girl, and Nancy's parents found out about the human sacrifices and went to see Marcus to tell him..that's when they were killed..but by whom??

o and I celebrated the summer solstice at midnight on Sunday, June 21st.

Chapter 36

Desiree' didn't seem the least bit upset at our dire circumstances, but reacted in her own peculiar way..she opened my trunk and tittered as she rummaged through all of my personal possessions, and I saw that her belongings had been placed in there as well. " Did you think that Sher would let one speck of you or me remain here with Marcus, Nancy? "

The nightglow dial on my watch showed it was already past midnight. " I guess not, Desiree'. " I thought of Marcus and our now failed wedding plans.

" Don't get yourself into a blue funk, Nancy..even though we won't be marrying him tomorrow, we should fall on our knees and pay homage to the Great Goddess. " I had no idea what Desiree' was talking about. She rolled her eyes. " This is Friday, the 13th, her holiest of days, and she says we must concentrate on moving forward in our new life. " She patted our belly. " Remember, the play isn't over until the fat lady sings.."

I shook my head. " What's that supposed to mean, Desiree'? "

" You'll know soon enough. " Desiree' and Bethanie spoke as one, then laughed as Valera and Dr. Franco came through the door.

" Valera, when I spoke to Adrian he agreed that both you and Dr. Franco will be welcome additions to Angelo's home. " While they slept, I paced back and forth..not even Desiree' could calm my nerves.

I answered Gustav's knock. " Countess Nancy, Adrian's arrived, but I'm so sorry that you won't be staying with us. You know how much Count Marcus needs me now and Valera will keep you safe. " He kissed my cheek, then hauled my trunk downstairs.

Adrian couldn't contain his happiness, while I steeled myself against any and all emotions. I took one last glance at Castle Desiree' and noticed Marcus standing on the second floor landing. His face was expressionless, so there was no telling if he was happy or sad at my departure. Valera handed me a small bottle of sweet tasting green liquid. " This fresh violet juice will help you sleep for a while. "

I laid my head on Adrian's lap and woke up when we came to a sudden stop in front of the picture postcard setting of White Wolf Lodge. " I thought we were going to Springfield and Angelo's Classiques, Adrian. "

" Danger lurks in familiar places and we're only making a pitstop here. "

Angelo met us at the door and I hugged him, feeling a bit of peace enter my soul. " Countess Nancy, it's good to see your smiling face once again. " He kissed Valera on the cheek and shook Dr. Franco's hand. " Lunch is served. "

I had no appetite for the ham and cheese sandwiches and found myself wandering into a section of the cabin I hadn't seen before. There were dozens of wolf pictures on the walls and nature books scattered about, but I was mesmerized by a gilt-framed oil painting. " That's my mother, Lorraine. " Adrian materialized beside me at the foot of his four-poster bed.

" She looks just like you. " He lifted the back of my hand to his lips and kissed my flesh, then offered me his wrist on which to feed. His blood to nourish me, so I could nourish his child. " Thank you, Adrian, not just for your life force, but for not pushing me. " I sighed. " There aren't any easy answers in my heart and soul right now. "

He smiled, then looked at his watch. " I know, Nancy, and although I'm in

no rush, it's time to leave. "

" Where are we going, Adrian? "

" To our destiny, Nancy..to our destiny. "

I hoped that putting my trust in Adrian wouldn't come back to haunt me as we left behind all things familiar. Angelo and Adrian split driving shifts, sticking to two-lane blacktops and backroads on our cross-country trip to the wilds of Montana.

The mountainous areas were snow-capped backdrops when the sun rose Wednesday morning, February 18th. Adrian finally pulled up in front of a rustic log cabin and a tall man with red curly hair came down the steps, shouting and hollering to beat the band. " I'm certainly glad that my son has decided to come home, and it's a triple blessing that he brought along such beautiful female visitors. By the way, the name on this end is Jackson Connor. " He winked in Angelo's direction, then shook his hand. " It's good to have you back in this neck of the woods. "

His hug was warm and we became instant friends. " Welcome to my humble abode,

Lorraine's Lodge. " Snow crunched under our boots as we walked up the steps and inside to a roaring fire that hissed and crackled, casting gleams of light on the polished redwood floor. Nature books lined one wall, while photographs and oil paintings filled the empty space on the adjoining walls. " Everyone, have a seat and relax. " Jackson served us strong coffee and lemon pound cake and I listened to the three men chit-chat about how much the natural land had changed over the years. He began clearing dishes and I followed him into the kitchen. " When Adrian called and said he was bringing some friends to visit, he didn't mention having a beautiful girlfriend..I can see how special you are to him and how much he loves you. "

I didn't deny the fact. " Jackson, I'm pregnant with Adrian's child and he's asked me to marry him. " I laid his hand on my belly and he gave me a questioning look. " Our relationship's been quite complicated and I haven't accepted his proposal, yet. "

" But you're going to? "

" I was hoping you'd help me plan a surprise wedding. "

" Let me take care of the details. " He made a quick phone call and talked for a few minutes. " I'm great friends with Judge Arnold and everything's arranged if you don't mind a civil ceremony on Saturday evening? "

I nodded my head. " That'll be fine. " I knew Valera would perform the rites that Kermes Twa would demand of me later.

He placed the phone in its cradle as Adrian whooshed through the door.

" I see that spark in your eyes, Dad..what're you up to? "

" Not a thing, Adrian. Nancy says she's had a sudden attack of claustrophobia and needs some fresh air..why don't you two take a walk up Shadow Mountain before bad weather sets in later this afternoon. " Any thoughts of his father having ulterior motives swiftly disappeared and Adrian guided me towards the front door. " We'll be back in time for lunch. "

The sun was buttercup yellow against the cloudless blue sky. At the top of a winding hill Adrian pointed out larch, spruce, western red cedar, and an alpine meadow towards the north. " Past that meadow is the aspen grove where I met the white wolf. "

" I'd love to see that area, Adrian. "

" It's Mother Nature's most special place on earth. "

" A good spot for unraveling mysteries, Nancy. " Kermes Twa whispered in the wind.

" What an unusual sight. " Adrian turned my head and pointed to his left. On an outcropping of bare granite was a lone falcon, extending his wings as far as they'd go. He settled down and watched us with curious yellow eyes. " You see how he landed on the north-east tip..he signals us to embrace the motivating crosswinds of experience as we explore the inner workings of our individual personalities and integrate the lessons learned in our approach to Life's Path. "

The falcon flew away amidst fat, swirling snowflakes and I took what Adrian said to heart, knowing my life was moving in the right direction. By the time we reached the cabin, snow almost obscured our sight. Jackson opened the door and we warmed ourselves by the stone fireplace, then I realized that Valera, Dr. Franco, and Angelo were gone. " Before the storm hit, Angelo drove the ladies to his townhouse where there's more room, but rest assured the weather will clear up within the next couple of days and they'll return. " He handed me a small bag filled with Valera's potions, then served us hot cocoa and thick hunter's stew for our midday meal. Adrian told his father about our encounter with the lone falcon and Jackson said, " Come with me. " We followed him down a short hall into an artistic hideaway.

" I'd almost forgotten about Mother's painting. " It was uncanny the way Lorraine had captured the falcon's piercing stare, almost as if it were alive in the room with us.

" She was inspired to paint this on the day she found out she was pregnant with you, Adrian. " The rest of the room was eclectic..from woodsculptures and totems to handmade quilts, gazing balls, tarot cards, and gypsy runes. I felt at home and smiled when Jackson said, " I see that Lorraine's spirit has welcomed you into her most private space. " He opened another door to the left of the painting. " And please feel free to use this as your bedroom, if you so desire. "

Adrian stood behind me..the walls were redder than the blood that flowed through my veins, the bed a pure white contrast, reminding Desiree' of her Uncle Joshua's knot garden..she drew in a sharp breath when we saw paintings by the dozen of DuMond House. " What is it, Nancy? "

I stared at each picture in turn and was totally surprised when the last few showed a man, his wife and baby girl. I removed the locket that Dr. Franco had given to me and handed it to Jackson, then explained my circumstances.

" Let me give Judge Arnold a buzz and see what he can find out for you. "

When Jackson left, Adrian draped his arm protectively around my shoulders. " I was right to bring you here, Nancy. "

" Tell me about your mother, Adrian. " He patted the bed and I removed my shoes, then slipped under the soft down comforter as he reverently opened

the lone book that lay on her dresser.

He pulled a rocking chair near the bed and began. " ' My name is Lorraine Kristoffe and as with all stories, the past is connected to the future. My mother's people are part of the Romnichels, generally known as Gypsies. Roma origins began on the Indian subcontinent over one thousand years ago when they entered southeastern Europe in the last quarter of the 13th Century. Because they arrived in Europe from the East, many thought they hailed from Turkey, Nubia or Egypt, so they were called Egyptians or 'Gyptians, which is where the word "Gypsy" comes from.

My father and his father and his father before him dealt in trading horseflesh..one of the great stories that was passed down through the generations happened at the Turlough Horse Festival near Fredericksburg in 1876. My ancestor knew that the men were partial to Arabian horseflesh so he dressed and acted the part, not to deceive in the selling, but to make sure his family had enough food to eat and clothes to wear. He sold the finest black Arabian horse to Count Marcus of Fredericksburg and after seeing his beautiful companion, urged him to buy her a gentle grey Andelusian. The day was made complete when his mother sold an expensive bolt of exquisite red velvet to her good friend Natalia, the young lady's chaperone. ' "

" That was a day of many contrasting emotions. " Desiree' laughed as she told Adrian the story, beginning with the book she found in Marcus's own handwriting.

" What do you feel in your heart for Marcus? " Adrian asked the inevitable question.

" Everything, Adrian..from the highest highs to the lowest lows and what passes for inbetween. No matter what comes in Nancy's life, he's the only man I could ever give my heart and soul to. "

Desiree' was gentle in her approach. " But I am fond of you, Adrian, and I hope that counts for something. "

" It definitely does, Desiree'. "

" I'm much more than fond of you, Adrian. " Bethanie put her 2 cents worth into the mix.

He knew better than to ask about my feelings and continued reading from Lorraine's journal.

" ' With monies made from that day my forebears knew providence had smiled upon them and the next generation was able to make the move to the great land of America in 1897. They bought a thousand acres of good horse-breeding land on the Deerfield River in North Central Massachusetts. Life treated them kindly for many years, but hard times came and my mother and father used their artistic talents as flamenco dancers in the early 60's to keep their inheritance from being foreclosed on. My mother told me that the flamenco originated in Andalusia and became famous throughout the world. From Andalusia this style spread across the Iberian Peninsula and then to Spanish America, until flamenco song, dance, and guitar playing became a generally accepted form of popular entertainment.

My parents were urged to travel across America in a VW bus and they took me with them. I was never allowed to attend regular school, but Mother was a wonderful teacher. When I was seventeen, our dance troupe was asked to perform at a small university in Montana. The moment I laid eyes on Jackson Connor, I knew we'd be married, even though it was forbidden by Gypsy law to marry outside of our family.

He was a young forestry student who used Indian folklore and animal totems to gain extensive knowledge of Mother Nature. On our first date Jackson asked me when I was born. I told him February 21st and he said that the wolf totem would link us forever as that was his birthday also. I was enraptured as he spoke of our innate wolf nature. " We are heralded with the gift of the seer..highly intuitive, the wolf soul tends to be sensitive, compassionate, and tender, cringing at the thought of others existing in pain or suffering. " Jackson then asked me the exact time of my birth then went into more specifics. " Lorraine, you're part of the distinctive gray wolf totem..blindly innocent from birth, you mature as you explore the world, experiencing the inner fire of transformation throughout your life, adapting to all life's challenges as love guides you on your journey. " From the moment Jackson entered my life, I was forever changed. ' "

I noticed Jackson standing in the doorway, listening to Adrian speak. " The first time I saw your mother, I knew she was the one for me when she approached from the south, the sun a halo behind her head. Even though we only had a short time together, through her loving kindness she provided me with the greatest gift of all. " He gave his son a big hug, and my heart was

happy at this sign of family bonding. " Adrian also shares the same birthday as his mother and I and is part of the Arctic wolf totem..his wisdom unfolds as he acknowledges the true values of his personal potential. Amidst numerous challenges and setbacks, he reaches new goals and emerges stronger than before, knowing that he is worthy of what life gives. "

" Yes, Adrian is more than worthy of the love he'll receive from you, Nancy, just as you are worthy of him. " Kermes Twa prodded me into getting up to join them in a group hug that was much appreciated. " Your love adds balance to their overburdened scales, the warmth of homefires burning in the darkest night of the soul. "

I wondered how that could be when I had so many issues to deal with inside myself. Kermes Twa gave me the answer through Adrian's voice. " Nancy, you were born under the owl totem and as such, want to understand all about Life's many mysteries. Each new situation and encounter brings about better understanding and appreciation for others and one of your greatest natural abilities is to see the positive in all. A deep sense of satisfaction is brought about by nesting and nurturing, concentrating and focusing on hidden secrets within yourself. The lesson of true union comes through integrating personality, emotion, mind, and soul. " He winked and I thought of Desiree' and Bethanie, then yawned. " You must be worn out..let me get you some fresh towels so you can shower and rest. " The clock struck midnight.

Hot water enveloped my body in a sense of urgency and I finished post-haste. I didn't bother to say a word as I slipped out the back door, following the sounds of a screech owl in the distance. I walked past the meadow that Adrian had pointed out and found myself in a thick aspen grove..when I reached the tree where the owl sat, he flew to a circular opening, then quickly flew away. Always the curious one, Desiree' took it upon herself to thrust her entire arm inside the hole. She brought into view a mildewed leather bag..the hair on the nape of my neck stood up and I slowly turned around, coming face to face with the growling snout of a ferocious-looking white wolf. I was ready to turn tail and run like the wind. " He won't harm you. " Adrian stepped from the shadows. " I see you've found my secret stash. The same day the white wolf joined his spirit to mine, Angelo brought this bag to me..he said it was an inheritance from my mother, but wasn't to be opened until my mate found it. "

He held out his hand and we walked back to Lorraine's room. He undid the

clasp and a small book fell out. Adrian and I were both intrigued when we saw the author's name. " ' I write this in the privacy of my heart and soul as a legacy to the baby Jackson and I will have in February. Although I'm happy, what the future holds for any of us is a big question mark. Since Angelo's moved back to Springfield, I have no contacts nearby to help if need be, but I've phoned him and am greatly reassured that all will be as it's meant to be.

My mother oft told a tale which might be implausible to some, including Jackson, but I'm hoping you'll come to know and believe what's written here. In the late 1870's much of my ancestors' gypsy life was spent in travel between Nancy, France and Fredericksburg..selling, buying and healing horseflesh for other clans and of course, outsiders. My great, great, great grandmother Sabrina was born in 1880, and her true beauty and innocent nature were a magnet to those around her. She came from a long line of seers, but lacked vision when it came to herself.

She met and fell in love with a handsome rogue, Phillip Connor. ' " Bethanie gasped at the mention of her son's name. Adrian continued. " ' His parents died in a boating accident when he was very young, and he was raised by his aunt and uncle, Annelle and Reven Aleanse, but when he reached majority at age 18, he inherited a mighty sum of money and property. Sabrina's tribe fell upon hard times, and Phillip presented an offer of marriage to her father..in return her family would never want for material possessions or money again. Her father was blinded by the truth of who and what Phillip really was, and consented to their marriage. Soon after, they moved to America and Sabrina adopted Phillip's way of life, losing contact with her own parents in Europe. ' " Adrian frowned, then reached into the leather pouch again. In his hand he held a thin sheaf of yellowed paper that was a portion of Sabrina's journal.

" ' I met Phillip Connor when he was ten and I was seven..even then I knew I'd marry him. He was raised by his aunt and uncle after his own parents died on their 3rd wedding anniversary. Many times I snuck away from camp to play with him and his cousin Raven, at their house. I was always treated like a family member by Reven and Annelle, even though my customs and religious beliefs were very different from theirs. Raven and his parents attended regular Christian Church services, but Phillip was being groomed by a local priest named Father Quimper in order to establish a church and mission in America. Phillip proposed to me on the night he was no longer considered a legal ward of his aunt and uncle, but the only way we could marry was for me to be part of his holy initiation ceremony. He explained

that I'd be more than honored as no other female had been allowed to partake in the ritual without undue harm befalling them. I agreed to receive the great spirit of Hella Dracon into my heart and soul and act as she commanded me. ' " Desiree' shuddered as she remembered her own fate..Bethanie and Adrian didn't understand until she told them the story. " ' The night was dark and starless..red candles lit our way to the catacombs beneath the Nancy Cathedral. I was led to an inner room and told to remove all my clothing and adornments, then cover my nakedness in robes of purest white. I dressed and waited until Father Quimper knocked on my door and I followed him to a raised dais where Phillip stood proud and tall in black novice robes. Thirteen monks came and bowed before us, then cut their wrists, producing blood which flowed into a crystal chalice. Father Quimper handed the sacred cup to Phillip and me and we drank of the intermingled life force together. Phillip raised my wrist to his mouth and began the marriage ritual. He drank of my life and love for only him. ' Sabrina, I swear on all I hold holy that I'll love only you, being your nourishment now and forever. ' In turn, he gave his wrist to me and I repeated the words to him.

Our gypsy vampire coven made the move to America and we worshipped Hella Dracon and Blaec Toth Snaca with the sustenance of fresh innocent blood. We raised horses and one wonderful son, who married the only daughter of our high priest. Once a male baby was produced by the chosen couple, the old priest was killed and replaced by a new priest, whose wife was blessed with only one daughter, thus ensuring no interbreeding and weakening of the gene pool. Clan rules stated that if a female was produced by the chosen couple, she'd be offered as a living sacrifice to Hella Dracon and Blaec Toth Snaca, then the couple would be forced to have another child, hopefully male.

These rites and rituals were closely followed for years, but my own parents, the chosen couple, weren't blessed with a son. The very night I was born, they broke with convention. Angelo helped them change their identities and they traveled cross-country to Montana, where they settled into their new lives as teachers of gypsy culture.

When I told them I was going to marry Jackson, my mother warned me about becoming pregnant..she showed me how to make an herbal tea consisting of juniper and barberry to drink at the beginning of my menstrual cycle, but being young and in love, I tended to forget and nature took its course. Jackson knows nothing of my past and although he's taken me to

many of his people's doctors, there's no cure for unknown causes. My parents went for a short retreat into the mountains, but haven't returned, so my last recourse is to call Angelo and ask for his assistance before it's too late to deliver my baby. ' "

Adrian placed his hand on my mid-section. " I'll always be here for you and our baby, Nancy. "

He gathered me into his arms and I knew if I let myself be drawn into the simple truth of his love..Kermes Twa spoke. " Even though your life's path is filled with dangerous pitfalls, Adrian loves you and will protect you and your baby from any and all harm, but if you go it alone or have second thoughts about returning to Marcus, I can't give you any guarantees. " I sighed and tears fell from my eyes. " Your heartache won't last forever. " Emanating from a corner of my trunk was a pulsing red light..Adrian opened the lid cautiously, but I laughed when Desiree's necklace came into view. I picked it up and Adrian clasped it around my neck, its tiny ruby in the middle matching every beat of my heart. " Don't allow anyone but Adrian to have access to your heartbeat. "

" I remember seeing this necklace glow as I sang ' Think Or Feel ' to you. " When Adrian kissed me, the beat tripled in time, and I felt no guilt or shame where Marcus was concerned.

Chapter 37

Adrian and I were still fully clothed as we fell fast asleep in his mother's bed until late Thursday afternoon. I woke when a tapping came at the door. I didn't think twice before I mumbled, " Come in. " I saw shocked looks pass over Valera and Dr. Franco's faces, then I noticed Adrian was still in bed with me.

Desiree' and Bethanie laughed outloud as Adrian excused himself from the all female presense. he closed the door and gave us some privacy.

" He couldn't stand the heat so he got out of the kitchen! "

" Nancy, would you care to fill us in on what's happening between you and Adrian? " I had a feeling Valera already knew, but wanted Dr. Franco to hear the words from my lips.

" To get down to the nitty gritty, I'm going to marry Adrian this Saturday evening, although he doesn't know it yet. "

Dr. Franco frowned as another knock sounded at the door. Adrian stood there with a huge smile on his face. " I have someone who wants to meet you, Nancy. "

" We'll discuss this issue among others this evening. " Dr. Franco was stern.

Desiree' laughed. " She does remind me of Valera. " I took that as a good omen of sorts.

I brushed my hair and put on my best of smiles. A distinguished older gentleman sat in front of the fireplace, but rose as I entered the room. Jackson introduced him as Judge Arnold. He shook my hand and led me to the kitchen table. " Have a seat, Miss Adams. " I drew a blank for a minute, then remembered that was my real last name, one that I wouldn't have much time to get used to. " He opened up a briefcase and brought out legal papers galore. " My first law practice was in Springfield and my first clients were your parents. " I drew in a deep breath. We went over all the legal issues and at the end he said, " You're a very lucky young woman, Nancy. According to provence law, if a legal heir hadn't been found at the end of 24 years, all your legal rights would have been forfeited and the house and estate reverted to any remaining legal heirs to be appointed by Marcus Canossa. "

That shocked Desiree', Bethanie and me, but we didn't have time to dwell on the matter as Adrian strolled in. " Is everything ok, Nancy? You and the judge have been in here for over 3 hours. " I told him about what Judge Arnold and I had discussed and that DuMond House legally belonged to me, but didn't tell him about Sheridan's part. " I have to go to France before the year is out to sign papers, plus the fact I really want to see the house for myself. " I certainly didn't want Sheridan to have any access to what was rightfully mine.. a disturbing thought entered my mind as Marcus's name flitted across my mind and I wondered if he knew firsthand about any of this and if this was a major reason why he became involved with me.

" Adrian, I'm tired.." I felt weak and exhausted. " You need some nourishment and rest. " He walked me back to his mother's room and I fed on him..his blood calmed and soothed me and I felt better.

He kissed my forehead and got ready to leave for his own room. " I'll send Valera to you. " Valera had begun treating him with herbs and his strength and stamina remained intact, even when I fed from him.

Valera came in with Dr. Franco in tow. " We need to speak, Nancy. " I agreed as long as Valera stayed in the room with us. " I don't think marrying Adrian on the rebound will be good for you..or Desiree' or Bethanie as many problems are sure to arise. First of all, your feelings for Count Marcus need to be addressed. Tell me what you really feel. "

I took a deep breath.." my feelings for him are an enigma, either burning hot or blowing cold, with no happy inbetween medium..no solid ground to base the reality of love on..his actions speak much louder than his words. Adrian has made his love for me loud and clear from the moment we met, never waivering in words or actions..and it's true I was drawn to him from the beginning, so it's not like I have no feelings for him whatsoever. " I shook my head. " I want my baby to know both of his or her parents..neither Adrian nor I had that chance. "

" That's still not enough to base a marriage on..after your baby is born are you willing to let Adrian share everything within the holy bonds of matrimony, including physical love? "

Bethanie answered in my stead. " Marriage is made up of spiritual, emotional and physical aspects and and once we've said I do, it will be a marriage in every sense of the word. "

Desiree' said, " I second that emotion. "

" Adrian will have all of me when we wed. " Dr. Franco didn't seem convinced and in reality, neither was I.

Dr. Franco handed me a large sheaf of papers.." Before Saturday comes, you have some reading to do..then you make up your mind. "

She left and Valera touched my cheek. " The Great Goddess knows of your doubts and hesitations, and although marrying Adrian is not quite the path you thought you'd be taking, you and Adrian are the fullfillment of balance that the universe seeks.

His innocence evolves from the roots of darkness and your darkness from the very essence of innocence. I understood that Lorraine's parents had chosen goodness over evil and had transferred all those traits to him, but didn't have an inkling when it came to my past roots. " Everything will be revealed in its given time. These papers are compelling, but don't be swayed by what you read. "

The first paragraph stated that Marcus had read what was contained within and had consented to therapy sessions with Dr. Franco in order to resolve his part in Desiree's death. " I knew he had good reasons for sending us away. " Desiree' was estactic.

" I think it best I read them outloud to you as I was with Marcus and Dr. Franco. " I knew Valera didn't want Desiree' to give me any ideas about running back to Marcus on the spur of the moment. " I'll take up where we left off reading about

Father Quimper. She went back to the last paragraph. " ' Pierre has kept me informed of the progress that's been made with the family, but has explained that Marcus the 1st never completely recovered from his 1st wife's death and has weakened to the point that he's near to death himself..his doctors thought that grief finally did him in of course, Rochelle has helped that process along with mandrake on a daily basis, causing deep sleep, and when awake, devistating hallucinations..Pierre has asked me to perform last rites and I'll travel to Fredericksburg tomorrow. He managed to last until his son's 16th birthday, the legal age of inheritance. Marcus the 2nd is holding up quite well, at least on the outside, but I know his heart is broken. Sheridan has informed me that Hella Dracon has told her that she is the one to marry Marcus as he will be the embodiment of Blaec Toth Snaca as Sheridan is the counterpart to Hella Dracon, then our circle will be complete..of course that will be further down the road as Sheridan is only 13 and must be groomed to play the part of gracious hostess and wife, and Marcus will be going to the university to learn all about wines and winemaking so he can run his father's estate..then and only then will the mating take place. Marcus was chosen because of his great passion and loyalty..once they marry, Sheridan will have no problems in persuading him that the true worship of Hella Dracon will give both of them eternal life. ' " I wondered how Marcus had reacted to that portion of the notes and my question was answered.

" ' At that point, I asked Marcus if he wanted to undergo hynosis and remember any details that he might have forgotten over the years. He agreed

and I took out Pierre Franco's star medallion and he drew in his breath and I knew we were on the right path. ' "

' " I knew without a doubt my father didn't have long to live on the earth, but always thought it was because he missed my mother so much..I always blamed myself for her death.." He drew his hands across his face and wept bitterly. it never entered my mind that Sheridan and Rochelle wanted him dead for their own evil purposes. "

" When I first met Marcus, his giving nature was to see the good inside those he met, but Sheridan changed all that..I wish I could hold him in my arms and tell him how much I loved him, but I realize the impossibility of the situation. "

Marcus had given as much if not more than he'd taken from me and the love I had for him welled into tears of frustration. " It's only natural that your emotions are intensifying now that you're pregnant..this is the same way I felt about Phillipe when I was kept from him..you're lucky that you have good feelings about Adrian, though. " She didn't have to add the last part about hating Marcus.

" I know what you're in need of, Nancy..without Adrian's life force to nourish and calm your fears and apprehensions and give you perspective, you'll slowly go mad.." As if on cue he waltzed through the door carrying a tray of sandwiches and soup.

After we finished eating Adrian got up to leave..my decision was made then and there. " Stay with me, Adrian. " He grinned from ear to ear and climbed up beside me. I laid my head on his chest and listened to his steady heartbeat as Valera brought him up to speed, then began reading again.

" ' For the last six years plans have gone smoothly and we've been using the chapel behind Montague Cathedral to ready the monks for the King's special services. This afternoon the chapel was desecrated by a young woman named Desiree' Terrance..she was traveling through with her Uncle Joshua and Phillipe Grenoble, two gentlemen I had become friends with..I saw her once again in the catacombs beneath the Nancy Cathedral where an emergency meeting was held in order to determine how best to cleanse the chapel. ' "

Marcus interjected. " Desiree' might have been mischevious, but she'd never desecrate anything considered to be holy..Father Quimper must be mistaken. "

" That's when Dr. Franco handed him the rest of Annelle's papers, along with an excerpt from Desiree's own handwriting for him to read, telling of her encounter at the chapel with the red robed monk and the evil note that had been slipped into the poetrybook that Phillipe had given to her. "

Desiree' shivered as she said the words. " ' Do you think you can escape the fate of your destiny? Your profanity has doomed you to life beyond Hell. ' "

" ' After Desiree' came up to our room after her afternoon visit with Phillipe, she seemed sad and ill at ease. As I brushed her hair, she asked if I knew anything about Montague Cathedral and Father Quimper, as she, Father, and Phillipe had stopped there for a visit before coming to Paris. "

" Many of the stories I have heard are pure flights of fancy, told by those who wish to discredit the Church and all she stands for. They say the Chapel was built on consecrated ground, dedicated to a hideous god of unknown regions who wears a hooded robe to hide his facial features. The priests worship the name of Blaec Toth Snaca..he has the body of a man and the head of a snake with sharp fangs and red eyes that glow in the dark. He is cruel and bloodthirsty, personifying the evil intentions of dark wickedness, ruling the forces of chaos and confusion. "

Desiree' asked if I believed and I told her there are many things that I do not understand or wish to believe. I have met Father Quimper on a few occasions and he seemed like a caring priest, deeply devoted to his church and God. It is doubtful he would allow evil practices to go on there. " She fluffed my hair. " It is time for us to rest, as the morning comes with haste. "

" ' I told Desiree' I knew about a certain cathedral which housed the tombs of Dukes and Cardinals in its basement..she seemed intrigued and we briskly walked down to the center aisle, paid an alter offering and picked up two unlit candles..I glanced around and made sure no one saw us, then pushed on a short recessed door near the back wall. I said, " It's a sacrilege for females to visit the tombs, but I've never been caught. " I led the way into the mazed catacombs, sneaking by many room openings, then made a right turn that

branched off into a huge hall. I stopped in front of dozens of gold and brass caskets shaped like sphinxes with massive lion's paws..carved on their lids were intricate snake designs and Desiree' asked me what the symbols meant. I lost my train of thought when male voices drifted towards us and we hid in a small alcove with our backs pressed hard against the wall as crimson robed monks filed past one by one. They formed a circle and chanted unknown phrases, then one monk raised his hands for silence, then separated himself from the group. " My Brothers, the time is close at hand. Once the full moon rises, the symbolic offering shall be readied for us. "

" Ohhm, " was their collective response.

Desiree' was quite shaken by our ordeal and said we must leave this demon place before we were presented as human sacrifices. Her fright was contagious and we ran back to the main sanctuary, then knelt in front of the altar and crossed ourselves. We sat in the front pew to catch our breath, then followed a group of older ladies out into blessed daylight. We walked back to Stanislas Square and the Fountain Of Neptune and dangled our feet in the water. I asked Desiree' what she meant in the catacombs. She told me the monk who stood apart from the others was the same man she saw at Montague Chapel.

Annelle laughed. " Desiree', I do believe that you have read too many morbid tales, and they have gotten your imagination working in a negative way. Consider today as your last big adventure before school starts. " She held my hand in a sisterly fashion. " Those holy men were just talking of the spiritual realms here on earth and in heaven above. They meant no harm, although I am sure they would have had the local Cardinal bar us from attending church for a month or so. " She shrugged her shoulders. " The chapel at home would be put to good use, so all in all it would not matter. "

" ' I saw her once again in the catacombs beneath the Nancy Cathedral where an emergency meeting was held in order to determine how best to cleanse the chapel and learned that Hella Dracon would mete out her punishment when the time was right. ' "

Marcus seemed upset that this had occurred and I knew things wouldn't get any easier for him.

" ' Life returned to normal until this same Desiree' came to live with

Sheridan, her mother and Marcus the 2nd. Although Sheridan and her mother tried their best to find a suitable husband for Desiree', Marcus upset all of Sheridan's best laid plans for her future with him, a major setback occurred on October 17th, 1875 when he married Desiree' in a surprise service on her 18th birthday, but Sheridan assures me it won't be long until Desiree's fate is signed, sealed and delivered.

It is with heartfelt joy that I received the good tidings of the day from Sheridan, herself. Desiree' has been arrested and thrown in to the Parisian Dungeon for the most hardened murderers and thieves. I believed she'd be left to rot in that hellhole, but was overjoyed when I saw that she was to be our human sacrifice for his Royal Highness's induction into the worship of Hella Dracon..although I would not be a partaker of her blood, I was happy that Sheridan was able to see her bitter enemy suffer so much pain and torment right in front of her eyes. Desiree' was close to death with the loss of so much blood and was unceremoniously dumped back in to the dungeon again. After his wife's death, Marcus couldn't be consoled and moved to America with Sheridan..she hopes that a fresh start will help him forget his wife and marriage and fall in love with her.

Months passed in peace and contentment, knowing that Hella Dracon was in control of our destinies, but unholy forces have brought about the untimely deaths of our original 13 monks, their bodies unceremoniously dumped on Castle Desiree's doorstep, and not long after, two of our most beloved and prominent members went to America on official business, and have disappeared after visiting with a New York socialite named Queen Rose. My heart was further burdened with grief for our true worshipers when Sheridan informed us that Desiree' was still alive and pretending to be her twin sister, Bethanie..she bedeviled him and he fell in love with her all over again and he married her under false pretenses. Hella Dracon has assured us it was in her best interests, as Marcus has tasted her blood and is becoming what he was always meant to be..the embodiment of Blaec Toth Snaca. It was his original sin that has caused all our misfortunes..the sin of falling in love with Desiree' when he was promised to Sheridan, but he'll find redemption when he's the one to finally kill Desiree' and take his rightful place beside Sheridan.The one bit of good news is that Marcus is bringing her back to Castle Desiree', as She's had a mental breakdown and I'm sure that Marcus will agree to use Pierre to help bring back her memories..what he won't know is that it will be memories of our own makings, and not the reality of what was done to her.

On Saturday, March 7th, 1877 I was honored to meet again with Mistress Desiree' and very pleased that she had no memories of me. She was with her cousin, Annelle, who was pregnant with her first child. Annelle stayed in the main church waiting her turn for confession while I took Desiree' to a small private chapel off the main portion.

I asked if she had any confessions to make before I prayed for her soul and swift return of her memory and she said " Just an overall forgiveness for what I can't remember. "

I patted her hand and asked her to kneel with me before a polished rosewood cross while I prayed to a God I actually didn't believe in any more. When we were through I helped her up and motioned her to a comfortable chair near my desk and poured wine that had been dedicated to Hella Dracon from a special decanter into a crystal goblet and handed it to her. " This holy water will cleanse your heart and soul, thus allowing God to attune your will to his. " My heart lit up when she mentioned she had already spoken with Dr. Franco. " He's a good man and an excellent psychiatrist, a doctor you can trust to restore your memories, so your life can be fulfilled in all ways. "

By the time we finished the afternoon had given way to twilight, and the carriage waited for us on the cobbled street. Father Quimper kissed both of us on the cheek before we left. " Godspeed and many blessings to both of you..please come back and visit at your convenience. " Hella Dracon allowed me to travel with Desiree', Marcus and Pierre to our holy Monasterium Damnare..Monastery Of The Damned which lay beneath Castle Desiree'.

Monday morning, March 9th I waited at the bolted door which led to the monastery's catacombs until Pierre and Desiree' arrived. Pierre left her in my care and I asked if she enjoyed history. " She nodded yes and after I unlocked the door we walked down a flight of stoneworked stairs and I recounted the gallery stories as Desiree' looked into the vaults which housed coffins of our dearly departed believers.

I didn't want her to get scared and turn tail and run, so I ushered her into the cloister..when she beheld the gargoyles, she turned her face into my robes, just as I had hoped. " Desiree', there's nothing here to harm or hurt you..these gargoyles were originally designed to serve as rainwater spouts and some said they scared away evil spirits. " He held me close until I calmed down. " My Dear, I had no idea you'd react as you did. I mainly wished to show you

the small sacristy where the original monks worshipped..God's soothing presence is there to unburden your heart and bring you peace. "

We entered the archway and glorious light filtered through the rose window. " Keep your eyes open and focused on God's window as you talk to Him, Desiree'. " Once I was sure that Desiree' was under Hella Dracon's hypnotic spell, I left, and came back 30 minutes later. Her neck still had fresh blood oozing from the goddess's bite marks..she said she wasn't feeling well, so I walked her back to her room.

" It's no wonder I felt dreadful after those sessions. " Desiree' was thoughtful. " What did Marcus have to say about that portion of Father Quimper's papers? "

His teeth were clinched, but he kept all his emotions hidden deep inside, fearing an emotional outburst would defeat the purpose of his being there..the doctor handed him Pierre Franco's papers in hopes he'd remember his role in Desiree's death and ask for help in resolving all the self-hatred he was sure to feel.

When my brother Luther and his wife were unable to concieve a child after being married for 10 years, I convinced them to adopt the baby daughter of an impoverished woman and her husband, who already had 6 children that they couldn't feed. They took my advice and Elise and Luther are happier than I've seen them in ages. They have named her Desiree' Bethanie Franco..she has black curly hair and startling lavender eyes..she was always a frail child and I was very glad that I was attending university in order to become a doctor of medicine..later on unforeseen circumstances would bid me study the human psyche and how it interacts with the body and soul..

I developed a lasting friendship with Johann Quimper, who was studying for the priesthood, although Catholicism wasn't his religion of choice. He brought me to the great understanding of Hella Dracon, Theophanic Goddess of Blood..true worship and devotion to her are the only requirements..13 is her holy number and as such there are 13 holy monks who are well-versed in the rites and rituals, the major one being the monthly sacrifice of those who have desecrated her holy temples. My schedule has not allowed me time to attend a sacrifice yet, but I know it will be more than special when I am able

to do so.

I have just started my medical practice near Fredericksburg and have seen Desiree' grow into a beautiful young woman..she has agreed to become the wife of Count Marcus Canossa of Fredericksburg. Their marriage bans have been set for one month and the wedding will take place inside the newly renovated Monasterium Damnare, where the original worship for Hella Dracon took place..Johann has received his invitation and will be staying with me as my most welcome guest. He has urged me to stay close to Desiree' per orders of Hella Dracon.

It's been 3 months since Desiree' was married and she came to my office today..she is pregnant with her first child, but is not a strong woman physically, so I've ordered strict bedrest until the baby arrives in late March of next year, 1850. I've written to Johann to break the good news.

With Desiree' spending much of her time resting, Hella Dracon has told me that Desiree's first child must be consecrated to her service, but Desiree' has refused. I delivered a healthy male baby for her and Count Marcus, but the Great Goddess required Desiree's life in exchange for her selfishness. I couldn't staunch the flow of blood after the delivery, and soon Desiree' passed into the next world.

Marcus the 1st was heartbroken and for many years wandered in a daze of sorrow..that's when I decided to study in the field of psychiatry and see if I could find some solution to his problems. Things seemed to get better when Johann introduced him to a recently widowed woman named Rochelle Grenoble and her young daughter, Sheridan. Both father and son seem well-pleased and Marcus and Rochelle were married shortly after the younger Marcus turned 10. Even though I thought that Marcus was making progress with life and living, I doubt that he's ever fully recovered from Desiree's death. My prognosis was proved right when Marcus the Elder passed away on Marcus the 2nd's 16th birthday.

Shortly thereafter I moved my practice to Paris, in order to study under the esteemed tutelage of BaacCeth Talon, noted hypnotist and mind manipulator. My studies served the purpose of Hella Dracon, exclusively.

I first heard of Desiree' Terrance through Johann, who said she was nothing

more than a troublemaker for the Great Goddess and must be disposed of. The next time I heard her name she'd had a nervous breakdown and had lost 3 years of memories..Johann wrote and told me I was supposed to come to the DuMond House near Nancy in order to supplant her real memories with ones of the Great Goddess's making.

I was met at the train station by Valera Jesamain, who filled me in on Desiree's current state of mind., which boded well for what the Goddess had in mind..when we arrived at DuMond house I had a short visitation with her husband, the 2nd Count Marcus of Fredericksburg..Johann insisted that I work with him as well, and turn him away from the love he has in his heart for Desiree' and that's exactly what I did from the first moment I spoke to him. In my possession was an unusual scarf that had been made for each of Hella Dracon's followers, and Sheridan's had been imbued with special properties so she could bring Marcus to her side, and as long as the scarf was in his possession whatever was told to him about Desiree' would be taken as gospel truth by him with no questions being asked. After I had checked her out a few times, I told him I would help his wife recover, both physically and mentally and her rightful memories and all would eventually be fine in their relationship.

Soon after he married Desiree' the first time around. Sheridan took him for a walk near the hedgerows and gave him a push into the stickers..as he wiped his blood off, it was offered as a sacrifice to Hella Dracon, and contrary to what the Count believes about Desiree' turning him into a vampire, it was his unknowing sacrifice to Hella Dracon that started his downwards spiral. Sheridan put the last drop of his innocent blood into a crystal for safe keeping in case unforeseen circumstances happened.

We all gasped at that revelation and I'm sure that Marcus seethed with controlled rage when he read that his mind had been manipulated by Sheridan and then Dr. Franco.

Kermes Twa whispered, " Guard that blood with your life, Nancy. " I fingered the crystal that hung around my neck and wondered what unforeseen circumstances the Great Goddess had in mind.

The 2nd afternoon I was at the DuMond house, Valera and I heard a loud screaming from above us and we ran upstairs to Desiree's room. Desiree' had no memories of our earlier visitations and asked why she had no memories of earlier events in her life. " Ah, well..my name is Dr. Pierre Franco. I'm a

medical doctor as well as a psychiatrist, or a doctor of the mind, if you will. Now to your question of no memories..much of the time we don't know specific causes or reasons as to why the mind retrogrades. Some men of medicine speculate that the brain does it in order to protect itself from excruciating traumas and episodes it's not ready to face or comprehend..in your case, it's probably due to lack of recuperation time from your accident, and lowered resistance to outside stimuli. Mistress Canossa, your fragile state of mind has overburdened you to the point that your husband gave me permission to work with you, until you're well in mind, body and spirit. " She narrowed her eyes to mere slits and I knew I had to gain her confidence. " First of all, I'd do nothing without your permission..a patient's cooperation is most important in psychological matters. I only wish to help, and I'll await your joint decision. " I left to write up my notes and await her decision.

Marcus came to visit me in the library, disturbed that he wasn't in control of his wife's situation. " At this moment Bethanie thinks she's Desiree' and you must leave it at that until I can work with her..also allow her some freedom as I'm sure she's disturbed about her memory loss as well as you are..I think she sees you as overbearing and giving no thought as to what she thinks or feels..give her some freedom..allow her to go into town with her cousin and do some shopping..maybe even spend some time in church..I'm told that Father Quimper is visiting and he's a close friend of mine..he can put in a good word for me and give her a push in the right direction. " She'll have to make a quick decision as I've received a telegram saying I'm needed in Fredericksburg by tomorrow evening. " I knew that Desiree' would agree, but didn't mention that fact to Marcus.

After Desiree' left with Annelle, I noticed that Marcus had left also, but returned right before Desiree' and Annelle. When I talked with him he was all smiles..Desiree' has agreed to return with me to Fredericksburg, only if you agree to come with us.

" That's wonderful news, Count Marcus and of course I'll go with you to Fredericksburg, but first you must do something for me. " Marcus turned around and faced the medallion I held in my hand..tonight your wife will ask you to stay with her as her husband..it is your duty to feast upon her blood, and then you'll begin to know her deepest darkest secrets..you'll remember that she's the one who turned you into what you're becoming and you'll begin to hate her with a passion you've never felt before in your life. "

I gave Desiree' a bit of private time, then went up to her room. " Good evening Mistress Canossa..your husband told me of your plans to leave in the morning and I'll gladly accompany you to Castle Desiree', but first I require a short private session with you this evening to learn a bit more about your memories. Please have a seat. " I pointed to a straightback wooden chair set near the wall and turned another one around so I could face her directly. I removed a black circular medallion with a glowing golden star situated in it's center, thankful that she didn't recognize it. " Do you know anything of hypnosis, Mistress Canossa? "

" I'm not familiar with that term. "

" It's a way of being able to take a person back into their mind's eye and retrieve lost memories. You'll tell me accounts of events and happenings and I'll relay them to you when you awaken from the hypnotic trance. Do you trust me to do that? "

" Yes, Dr. Franco. "

" Focus your eyes on the medallion's star and free your mind of all thoughts. " I'll only listen to the advice of Dr. Franco, Father Quimper, and Sheridan and Rochelle Canossa. Everyone else wishes to do me harm and I'll treat Marcus with respect, kindness and love that's his husbandly due. "

I had her repeat all my instructions just before a knock sounded at the door.

" Count Marcus..your wife and I just finished. " I turned back to Desiree'. " Mistress Canossa, I'll treat you with a strict regimine of care and guidance, thus assuring the return of your physical health and mental well being. " I paused for a moment. " Count Marcus, it'd be in your wife's best interest for Father Quimper to come along with us as Desiree's spiritual confessor. " I kissed the back of her hand. " I'll see both of you in the early morning hours. "

Early Sunday morning, March 8th, 1877 I knocked on Desiree's door, and went in when I heard Count Marcus. I carried a tray with croissants, coffee, and juice and handed Desiree' a large glass of fresh blood, flavored strawberries and cherries, meant to refresh and revive her.

" Count Marcus, the carriage awaits your presence. " I gave them some privacy so they could dress.

Johann and I shared a carriage on the way to Fredericksburg and compared notes as to what had been done and what we yet had to accomplish. I had encouraged Marcus to feed again on Desiree' while they were alone in their carriage, to keep her docile and compliant to his wishes. I knew he had done as asked when he had to carry Desiree' to their quarters because she was weak from bloodloss.

I saw her early next morning and gave her blooded nourishment, then Sheridan and Rochelle entered her room..she recognized neither one of them, which was a good sign that events were progressing as they should. They told Desiree' about Marcus's upcoming birthday party, one that we all would remember with joy and thanksgiving.

I left with Sheridan and her mother, so we could confer about the party's details, then I went back to check on Desiree'. " Are you feeling better, Desiree'? "

" Yes, Dr. Franco, all my aches and pains have gone away and I am bursting with energy. "

" After our session, we'll meet with Father Quimper..he's been visiting the priests in Fredericksburg and will return shortly. " I removed the same medallion from my coat pocket. " Please sit and let your mind float and drift into the center of the star. What did we discuss, Desiree'? "

" Memories of what happened before I reached the age of 10. But why talk of what I know, Doctor? "

" Although I have various reports of your family history from other sources such as your husband, Aunt, Uncle, and Cousin, I wanted you to fill in the blanks..this way your mind will grow accustomed to retrieving hidden memories from your last 3 years as well. "

After lunch, I walked her to where Johann waited, then left to speak to Marcus through hypnosis. He was to wait until Desiree' knelt in prayer, then he was to feed on her..take her life force in anger and revenge, not sparing

your hatred of what she turned you into. I knew that when she returned, she'd be weak again, so I sent more fresh blood for her to consume with the lunch Sheridan provided.

Later that evening, I went to see Desiree' for another session and she gave me all the letters that Phillipe Grenoble and she had written to each other, and it was icing on the cake. I took out my medallion and put her under hypnosis. I snapped my fingers, then asked,
" What do you see? "

" My husband Marcus, dancing with me..no, he's waltzing with my twin sister, Bethanie. "

" That's right, Desiree'. Marcus loved Bethanie with all his heart and soul, but she spurned his advances and ran off. Your father offered him a tremendous bribe to marry you in place of Bethanie so the family name would remain unbesmirched. "

" You mean my own father forced me into a loveless marriage? "

" Yes, Desiree', even though he and Marcus both knew you were in love with Phillipe. "

I knew that would reinforce her hatred of Marcus, and I continued in that vein for the rest of our sessions. Johann and she made numerous trips to the sacristy, where Marcus fed on her anger and hatred, day after day and the thought that she'd turned him into a vampire fueled the fires of his own hatred of her.

The morning of the party finally arrived, and anticipation of what was to occur weighed heavy in the air. The same rites and rituals which had been followed in the King's royal ceremony involving Desiree' the first time were strictly followed.

Johann and I stood in the cavernous basement and waited for Sheridan, Rochelle, and their servants to bring Desiree' to Hella Dracon's black altar, cross of blood.

Her hands were lifted, then stretched out horizontally and held in place by

Sheridan and Rochelle as Johann intertwined two pure gold snake charms on my upper arms. I was blessed to tie her wrists and ankles with strong golden cords so she had no means of escape. After the vestial virgins danced, then kissed her cheek, they left and Johann and I prostrated our bodies at her feet as we spoke in tones of reverence and awe. " Hella Dracon, Theophanic Goddess Of Blood, we can see how pleased you are at this feast presented in your honor. " Then we crawled away as the holy monks entered and drank their fill of innocent blood from the portaled gargoyles.

One last monk, dressed in pure red robes entered the room, then threw back his cowl and revealed the masked face of a hideous black snake with blood-encrusted fangs and piercing red eyes. He faced the crowd and they fell to their knees in worship, chanting..

" Blessed be the holy name of Blaec Toth Snaca, cruel and relentless in his blooding ritual, personifying wicked darkness..he rules the forces of chaos and confusion. "

He brought his palm to rest on the medallion which clasped Desiree's robe together. He removed it, then pressed it to her lips as the robe billowed around her feet. "

That's when Marcus threw the papers aside, and screamed in agony as he remembered his part in the ceremony..tell us about what you did to Desiree', Marcus..only then can the real healing process begin.

My sleeve slid to the elbow, and I pushed the kalisari to Desiree's waist, freeing her breasts for everyone to see. He closed his eyes as he relived the nightmare." Imprint your souls with the beauty of her skin and inhale the blessed scent of precious almond offerings. Know that she is truly the sacred vessel. This visage of Hella Dracon will soon flow with fresh sweet blood..the life force which nourishes and sustains us. Our benefactress will be honored with life everlasting for the gift she's provided. " I pointed to Sheridan.

I removed my mask and Desiree' saw my face damning her..I placed my hands on her breasts and sought her nipples, then bit down with a force so hard her blood flowed in gushing torrents and she screamed in terror as tears hotly streamed down her cheeks! " Tears and blood..the wisdom of the Goddess herself. "

Sheridan took her place by my side..Marcus cried in guilt and shame as he

recounted the words she said to Desiree'.

" Dearest sister-in-law, Desiree', you never had the power you needed over me! I knew from the beginning that you weren't any good for Marcus..he's told me over and over again how much he hates you for destroying his life and happiness, but most of all the love he had with Bethanie! Marcus knows you've been impersonating her for quite some time and he gave you just enough rope to hang yourself! " She smirked. " Good grief, Desiree', you don't have a clue as to what you really are, but your sinful nature weighs heavy on the souls you've damaged. " She laughed hysterically and did a little jig.

" Straightout truth is you're a vampire, Desiree'..a consumer of innocent blood to feed your addictions to life and living. The drink that Dr. Franco provided for you was pure blood, guaranteed to keep you healthy..fattening of the sacrificial lamb for a special birthday gift, so to speak. " Sheridan pointed to me. " Marcus has repaid you in tit-for-tat spades..everytime you consented to come here and speak with your God, Marcus has preyed on you and now he'll drain you dry, taking back the life force you stole without his permission. "

I sank my fangs into the tender flesh of her neck and the others left us alone. " Desiree', my Desiree'..God will be the only witness to your final destruction. " I said these words as I feasted on her until she was dead.

I held her limp and bloodless form in my arms. Tears fell fast and furious as I realized the finality of my actions. I was shocked when I gazed into Desiree's amulet, and didn't see my own countenance, but Desiree' staring back at me as my fangs dripped with her death's blood. I carried her lifeless body upstairs and laid it on the couch in front of her portrait as everyone gathered to look at my handiwork..I remeber being startled by a booming voice from above.." Yes, Desiree' is dead, but as I live and breathe, so shall her spirit remain alive inside her painting.

Sheridan spoke. " The Great Goddess Hella Dracon has made her ruling and we cannot argue with her wishes. "

" That wasn't the voice of Hella Dracon, but that of Kermes Twa, who brings about light from darkness, innocence from guilt, and life from death. " Desiree' breathed a prayer of thanks that the true Great Goddess had saved her soul.

He was more than horrified as he remembered he still had Sheridan's scarf in his possession, and that he'd used it on Nancy when they made love..that's when he knew that Sheridan would stop at nothing to kill anyone who got in the way of her being with Marcus.

" Marcus left and I have no ideas as to where he is or what he's doing now, but for a fact, anyone who was at that ceremony was killed, so there would be no witnesses for Marcus to question.. " Valera sighed. " It's almost midnight and you need to rest, Nancy. "

She left and Adrian and I were alone again. Too many unanswered questions reeled through my mind and I felt overwhelmed until Adrian offered his life force to me. The questions remained, but I felt his calm assurance flow throughout my system, and closed my eyes as he held me in his arms.

Chapter 38

A loud knocking came at the door. I glanced at my watch and saw the time..6am Friday morning! Adrian and I had fallen asleep in his mother's bed again. Jackson stood there with his arms on his hips. " Son, you seem to be monopolizing all of Nancy's time..now why don't you make yourself useful by chopping some wood for the fireplace..we're almost out! "

Adrian yawned and stretched, then kissed me on my cheek. " I'll be back in a while, but I'll only monopolize your time if you want me too, Nancy! "

I laughed. " That sounds good to me, Adrian. "

After Adrian left, Jackson closed the door and went to Lorraine's closet. " I have something I want you to see. " He brought out an ivory colored peasant dress with a rounded neckline, the bodice intricately embroidered with gold and orange butterflies..applied on the skirt was one magnificent red rose with a white butterfly resting on its petals. " Lorraine told me she had a vision concerning how her wedding gown should look..she found this in an old trunk that belonged to Angelo and wore it when we married. she said that butterflies are infused with planting the thoughts and ideas of the Great Gods, so that the universal plan can unfold itself upon the living to bring about balance and harmony. As the butterfly lands upon the rose, she picks up pollen and deposits it on the next rose, and as such ensures that species

survival. " He patted my pregnant belly.

" I want you to wear it when you marry Adrian tomorrow night. "

Desiree' drew in her breath. " Nancy, do you know what this reminds me of?

" With Desiree' there was no telling, so I rolled my inner eyes. " This is the same outfit Natalia gave me to wear when I went with her and Marcus to Turlough.."

I interrupted her stream of thought. " Let me try it on and see if it fits or needs adjustments. " I went into the bathroom..how do you know it's the same dress, Desiree'?" "

" Look underneath the skirt hem and you'll see that Natalia embroidered my initials in red thread. "

I turned it inside out saw DRT..Desiree' Rose Terrance and wondered how Angelo had come into possession of it, but didn't have time to think as I slipped it over my head and it molded itself to my body.

I came out and saw tears form in Jackson's eyes. " I can see why Adrian fell in love with you, Nancy. "

A soft tapping came at the door. Jackson cracked it open and admitted Angelo, who beamed, then gave me a big hug. Jackson said, " I'm going to check on Adrian and make sure he stays outside till you have time to change. " He kissed my cheek and left me alone with Angelo.

He spoke to Desiree'. " I remember the first time you told me you knew my great, great grandmother, Natalia, and I didn't believe you until I found her belongings amongst other things that had been bequeathed to me at her home near Turlough..everything you ever told me was confirmed in her papers. "

" Each time I've come back you've protected me, just like she did, Angelo. " She gave him a peck on the cheek and we went to change, before Adrian saw what was happening.

I carefully removed the dress and hung it up in the back of Lorraine's closet, just before Adrian came through the door with a breakfast tray, his hair still slightly damp from a quick shower. " Valera says for you to eat everything

on your plate, Nancy..you've got to keep your strength up. "

" Adrian, where's Valera? " I really wanted to know where Dr. Franco was, as I didn't want to be questioned by her as Desiree' flooded me with her memories of Turlough.

" She, Dr. Franco, Judge Arnold and my father went into town for supplies..I have a feeling my father wants to give me a welcome home party. " He laughed and I joined him, knowing that it would be more than a just a welcome home party.

" Angelo? " He nodded as if expecting my next words. " Tell me what you know about Adrian's mother, and how you and Desiree' met. "

I grew up near Turlough..it was famous for its horsefair and Flamenco dancers. I didn't care for horses, but was always interested in antiques..there were many too collect, but it was a hard sell in my own little corner of the world, so I made the move to America and settled in Springfield..it was a sleepy town with not much in the way of entertainment, but one weekend posters were put up all over, telling of gypsy entertainment featuring authentic Flamenco dancers from Turlough and I knew I must attend. Lorraine's parents were naturals and I introduced myself to them after the program..we had much in common and became fast friends. One day they came to me, their hearts filled with fear. Lorraine's mother was pregnant, and tests had confirmed she was to have a girl..that was unacceptable for certain reasons she said and she and her husband wanted to make a new start, but couldn't do it without changing their identities, and leaving their families without prior notice. I told them they could stay at my house and because of my business, I knew a man who could forge papers..the next day everything was set in motion, the work done and they left for Montana. A few months later I received an invitation to a baptism of sorts..although Lorraine's parents had left their colony, old country customs die hard. They wanted me to be a godfather to their baby, but I'd have to promise not to breathe a word of what they told me..I learned of their vampire covenant and how their daughter would always have need of fresh blood throughout all her life. I spent time traveling between Springfield and Montana and was happy when I learned that Lorraine was to be married to Jackson..I had studied many various religions, and there were 2 that appealed to me..one of a universal God of love and light, and one of Kermes Twa, who is known by many names, Goddess of Nature and Balance. With Jackson having to be

gone many times, Lorraine and I would discuss many topics..she introduced me to various gypsy customs and I introduced her to Kermes Twa, right before she became pregnant with Adrian..during that time, Lorraine's parents lived nearby, and I thought all was well and good with Lorraine's pregnancy. When she called and told that they'd gone off for a few days and never returned, she'd already been without much needed nutrients, and by the time I arrived to help her, the blood she drank was far too little, too late. " There were tears in his eyes as he said, " I was the one who delivered you, right before Jackson came home. Lorraine died soon after she gave birth to you, Adrian. " I held Adrian close to my beating heart as thoughts of Marcus immediately flooded my mind and I thought of how his mother had died when she'd given birth to him. " Your mother was very special, Adrian, and that's why she wanted you to know about your ancestors, and I can see that Kermes Twa was right in bring Nancy and Desiree' into your life in order to show you that love can encompass all, through the sharing of past, present and future. Everyone and everything in the universe is interrelated in one way or another. " I was a definite believer in that one statement.

" I'm sure my life would've been different if my mother had lived..who's to say we would've met, Nancy. "

" The same holds true for me, Adrian.." I thought of Marcus, Desiree', Bethanie and myself..the one person we all had in common was Sheridan..I wondered how she fit into Adrian's life.

Desiree' said, " I know the answer to that one, Nancy, but I'm hoping Angelo will tell the tale. "

" Now on to how Desiree' and I met..my parents died soon after I moved away from the old country and I was left in charge of my younger sister, Norah. She was a true beauty in every way and very trusting of people she encountered, but not being accustomed to the ways of the world, she became a victim of a certain older man named Wilhem who promised her everything her heart desired..she left with him and although I sent out detectives to search after the police couldn't find her, not a trace of her was ever found. I concentrated all my time with my business of antiques and collectables, never thinking I'd see Norah again, but one day a good friend of mine named Hugo phoned me from New York, and said he was on his way to Springfield to see me. said while on his trips to Egypt he was only one of a select few who received an invitation from an unscrupulous trader who raided tombs

and sold ancient artifacts to the highest bidder. He was picked up from his hotel and driven far into the desert night. Besides selling artifacts, this man also dealt in illegal female slavery. The trader always brought women to sell along with everything else and Hugo said he'd seen my sister there with the other slaves, and although she was older, physically she seemed none the worse for wear. Hugo offered to buy her after all the other trades were done..as soon as they returned to his hotel and he packed up, Hugo left Egypt with her aboard his private jet. It was 10pm when I met them at the airport..Norah was still beautiful, but in a different way, colder than ice when I kissed her cheek, with a hard edge to her voice and mannerisms..I asked if she remembered me and she said yes, but she had business to attend to in Springfield and would return to my house when she was through. Hugo and I were both shocked and waited all night for her return..it was almost dawn and when she came through the front door, she was covered in blood, smiling and praising Kermes Twa that she was alive and had been victorious in doing the Great Goddess's will. She wouldn't change her clothes, but fell into a trancelike sleep..this went on for two weeks, sleeping in the daytime and prowling at night, coming home covered in blood..each morning the local paper would describe how one or another evil doer had been slayed and I wondered if Norah had anything to do with their deaths. I was at my wits' end, trying to figure out why she was acting as she was..one evening Norah said was staying home as she was expecting company..I didn't know what to think of that statement or who'd be dropping by, so I stayed with her. The doorbell rang and she said, ' Why don't you answer it, Angelo? ' I did, and there stood a tall elegant lady and a gentleman with a shock of white hair. The lady introduced herself as Valera Jessamine and her driver, Gustav. She said she knew that Desiree' was living with me and wanted to speak to her. I was about to slam the door in her face when Norah ran into her waiting arms..they cried and hugged as if they'd been missing each other for years. I was bewildered. Valera and Gustav breezed right on in as if they had visited many times before. Valera said, ' I take it that Desiree' hasn't explained any details about her life or how she came to reside in Norah's body? ' Of course I shook my head, no. Norah took my hand and said, ' Angelo, I have a date with Wilhem tonight..would you like to come along and learn what happened to your sister? You'll hear the truth firsthand from from his own lips and then see how she'll be avenged with the help of the Goddess I worship. ' She looked at her watch. ' It's time to go. ' I was scared, but wanted closure, no matter how it came about. Gustav was behind the wheel and Valera sat in front with him, while Norah and I sat in the back. I held her hands in mine, and right before my eyes, Norah underwent a metamorphosis,

changing from a dark-haired beauty into a young, blue-eyed innocent blond of 16 or so. My heart raced and I thought for sure I was hallucinating, but a voice from overhead said, ' There's no need for you to worry, Angelo. I am Kermes Twa, Great Goddess of Balance and tonight Wilhem will have his just reward meted out in fine fashion, and your life will change as I see fit. ' We arrived at a secluded spot and Norah told me to wait in the tree shadows. It wasn't long before I saw headlights coming from the opposite direction and a familiar face emerged from the driver's side of Wilhem's expensive car. Norah ran to him, and it was all Gustav could do to restrain me. ' Watch and learn. '

Norah and Wilhem talked for a while, then sat in his car..a few minutes later, Norah came out and motioned to Gustav. He came back towards us, carrying the limp form of Wilhem. He was unceremoniously dumped in to the small cramped trunk..we got back into the car and drove back to my residence..there was no gentleness where Wilhem was concerned. His hands and feet were tied and a gag was placed in his mouth so there'd be no screams heard. By the time we returned Norah had reverted to her old appearance. He didn't seem to be waking soon, so Norah began nuzzling, then rubbing his neck until his jugular vein stood out..her eyes glazed over and Valera told her to have patience..if he's dead, how can the truth be heard and known? ' Norah said, ' Gustav, bring me some ice water. ' He did and she splashed Wilhem's face..he woke up and he struggled to free himself from his bonds to no avail. Norah ripped the tape off his mouth..' Well, Wilhem, who has the upper hand now? ' He sat there stupified as if Norah was a ghost from the great beyond. ' Certainly you remember me..little frightened Norah, all innocence and smiles for you. Do you remember what you did?' Valera handed her a needle and his face turned to ash..' I see you do remember..Valera's drawn a sample of blood from my body and determined that the heroin you injected me with was very high quality, leaving me without an ounce of resistance to you whims and wishes..I would have done anything for you, just in order to get more and more. " She turned her face away from him and fell to her knees.

" Great Goddess Kermes Twa,
Keeper of Darkness and Light
Judge between my innocence and his evil
Let the words from his lips be a testament against him "

Valera brought in a small plastic bag filled with a brown powder, and I made no assumptions about what it was as she put it under Wilhem's nose. " Do

you know what this is? " she asked as he was forced to take a big whiff. He began whimpering and cowering, pleading for mercy. " Valera took some of the powder and added it to a small vial of crystal clear water, then drew it up into a syringe.

" Unless you tell us what you did to Norah..the truth and nothing but the truth, I'll inject this full strength liquid into your veins and you'll suffer the consequences. "

He began babbling about how the god he worshipped had told him he must take the innocence of a young girl, to further his powers on this earth..and Norah was so sweet and unwise in the ways of the world that it was like taking candy from a baby. To watch her sleep brought joy into my heart, but Blaec Toth Snaca demanded that her joy and love be given to him, so I turned Norah into a junkie..she never knew what was happening until it was too late..after she was used up physically and mentally, no longer beautiful enough to bring in customers, I did the only thing I could and sold her into slavery. "

How I wanted to wrap my hands around his scrawny neck and kill him myself, but Norah said, " Angelo, his fate is not in your hands. " She nodded to Gustav who picked him up and took him to the cellar. Before the door was closed, she said.."Here's the god you worship..see if he'll take care of you! " I watched in horror as he was quickly enveloped, then devoured by a black-headed python. All the life seemed to go out of Norah and she barely made it to the kitchen table..Valera gave her a small cup of tea she'd made with the brown powder that Wilhem had been so afraid of..Gustav took her sleeping form to her room and laid her on the bed..I knew she'd soon leave this world. " Angelo, I love you, " She whispered and right before her spirit left, Desiree' said, " I'll see you again, Angelo. Gustav said, " We must bury her before the full moon rises. As we lowered her into the garden grave, Valera scattered basil sprigs over her body.. The superstition goes that the basil leaves will ensure safe passage to the next world for the innocent..I know what you're thinking, Angelo, that what I had in the bag was pure heroin, but it was just ground basil sprigs and leaves..heathen worshippers believe that if basil is injected or injected into the bloodstream, scorpions will nest in the brain..they believe that evil is good, and good, evil. " Gustav and Valera left after Norah was buried, and I closed shop and moved to Montana to ease the pain in my heart and soul. "

" Angelo was a wonderful friend to me and my father..we hunted and fished

and learned much about nature together..Angelo went back to Springfield and his business, and I began writing music..I sent Angelo some demo tapes and he managed to get me and my fledgling band a gig at Precious Metals. That's when my father told me I'd inherited White Wolf Lodge from my mother and I made that into my own home away from home.." Then he became somber. " I was young and impressionable, not too wise in the ways of the world, myself. I met the girl I told you about, Shani-Der.." the minute he said that name, a flash of bright blond hair clouded my vision and thoughts of Sheridan danced into my thoughts.." marvelous in Egyptian, belongs to God in Armenian..she was a light in my darkness, the love I thought would last for eternity, but she played me for a fool..taking, taking, taking until there was nothing left for me to give. When she told me she never loved me, that was the darkest part of my life..I didn't see any reason to live.." I held him close as he went on. " I decided to end all the pain and suffering I felt and had readied everything for my departure into the next world, but fell asleep instead. That's when you and Desiree' came to me in my dreams, telling me that my greatest desires would come to fruition if I held on to life and living for just one more day..the dreams were so realistic, so filled with wonder for what the coming day would hold, that soon all thoughts of suicide were banished and I concentrated on my music to get me through the days and my dreams of you to get me through the night. I never had any doubts that you would come, and now that you're here I don't intend to let anything bad happen to you or our baby. "

Apparently, Adrian didn't suspect that it was Sheridan who drove him to the brink of suicide, but the burning question was why she had allowed him to live..nothing made any sense. Just then, Jackson burst into the room..it's a damn good thing all of you came out here or you'd be toast! " He handed Adrian the local newspaper from Springfield and the headlines read..' Mysterious fires ravage 4 separate places..serial arsonist suspected. At the stroke of midnight, 4 fire alarms went off..firefighters rushed to each scene, but in the short time it took for them to arrive, nothing was left except for ashes. On going investigations are taking place at..Adrian pointed at the addresses and I drew in a sharp breath..my condo, Angelo's Classiques, the Precious Metals Bar, and last but not least, White Wolf Lodge were no more.

" Seems as if someone's out for blood, Nancy! " Desiree' laughed. " Kermes Twa says we'll be safe here for a while, but true safety lies close within the enemy's camp. " I took that to mean that Marcus was playing the devil's

advocate for a fool, but I didn't know where that left me or Desiree' in his plans.

" There's no more left for us in Springfield, Nancy. " Adrian was right and the further I was away from Marcus, the less I'd be thinking of him.

I heard a tittering in my head.." That's easier said than done. " Desiree' knew me so well.

Too many emotions and feelings coursed throughout my system and I fainted..when I woke up, it was early Saturday morning and Dr. Franco stood by my bed, taking my pulse. " How are you feeling, Nancy? "

I tried to sit up, but felt weak and woozy.." Your bloodcount is very low..I hope you're not thinking of going through with the wedding to Adrian..you're in need of bedrest right now..you're system has had too many shocks in a relatively short period. "

" I have to, Doctor Franco. "

" I have some added news, then that might make you change your mind. I examined you and you're going to have twins..furthermore, Marcus is the father of one baby. "

" I can't go back to Springfield and confront him with that detail, Doctor..I'm afraid he'd want to separate the twins and I know in my heart that Adrian would never let that happen. "

Valera came in, bringing me a huge glass of liquid nourishment. It wasn't Adrian's blood, but left a familiar lingering after-taste. " It is the wild pansy..its common name is heartsease and this particular flower is reputed to alleviate the pain of separating from a loved one. " Desiree' had all the answers to questions I wouldn't ask.

A tentative knock came at the door and Adrian poked his head in, followed by Angelo and Jackson.

" How's the most beautiful woman in the world? "

" She's in need of bedrest..peace, quiet, and no excitement whatsoever..that is if you want her to have a healthy baby. "

Adrian came and sat beside me. " Can I speak to Jackson alone..and then I want to speak to you, Adrian. " After everyone left, Jackson looked worried. " Dr. Franco is right about me needing bedrest, but I still want to marry Adrian..how soon can Judge Arnold be here? "

" An hour or two at the most? "

" As soon as he gets here I want him to marry Adrian and me.."

" I'll go and call him right now. " I had just enough time to gather my wits before Adrian entered the room..he smiled, then pulled up a chair and sat directly across from me.

" I want to give you a birthday present..gave him the Herkimer diamond ring and tears formed in his eyes as I said, " Adrian I'm consenting to wear your ring..I want to marry you today. " He was going to talk, but I put my finger to his lips. " I need to tell you something first before you say yes or no. " I conveyed what Dr. Franco had said about my having twins and Marcus being a father also and he nodded in understanding. " Are you still willing to make me your wife? "

He kissed me soundly and shouted for all the world to hear.." Yes, I'll marry you, and be a father to both your babies. " I knew there'd be no turning back now. He rushed out to talk to Jackson, and although the gathering for our wedding would be small, we'd have everything we needed, including undisputed witnesses.

While Adrian, Jackson and Angelo readied themselves for our ceremony, Valera came to me. " Nancy, you've chosen well and wisely, for Adrian is your only protection now. Before you say your vows, you must cleanse your heart and soul, and offer homage to Kermes Twa and Aquaelis for your good fortune and the balance of love that you and Adrian share. Place your hands over Desiree's necklace and feel the thread of hate that runs so deep, but the thread of love that runs much deeper, intertwined with lives past, lives present, and lives future. Let the words come in all their glory.

' Great Goddess Kermes Twa and Aquaelis, God of Balance
thank you for double blessings
that of day and night, darkness and light

the twinship of heartbeats between husband and wife
and mother and babies'

In the palms of my hands I held 2 separate heartbeats, one for each baby that slowly merged back into one steady heartbeat. " Judge Arnold will be here soon and you need to dress. " Valera went to the closet and came back with Lorraine's gown. She helped me put it on, then presented me with the jewelry that Phillippe had given to Bethanie, and that had finally passed into Adrian's hands. On my head she pinned a wreath of thornless wild red roses intertwined with dark green leaves. " The roses signify how Adrian has always seen you..for him it was love at first sight and the leaves are what Adrian means to you, hope for the future. "

A knock sounded at the door. " Are you ready, Nancy? " Angelo opened the door and proffered his arm to me. Judge Arnold stood with his back to the fireplace, facing front. Jackson and Adrian were dressed in coats and ties and drew in their breaths as Angelo walked me towards them. The only person not smiling was Dr. Franco, but there was nothing she could do to stop me.

No one said a word as Angelo clasped Adrian's hands in mine. Adrian and I had written simple vows which we said together. " I take you into my heart and soul, unified in love and togetherness, until death parts us. "

Judge Arnold said, " By the laws of this state, I now pronounce you husband and wife. "

Adrian kissed me on the lips and, then Jackson and Angelo kissed my cheek. Valera hugged me, then Dr. Franco said, " I wish both you and Adrian much happiness..her comment seemed genuine and I thanked her. " You need to sit down and rest, Nancy. " As Jackson and Adrian brought food to me, they told me about each of the dishes. Jackson said that Lorraine's mother had cooked their wedding dinner and that was what he'd made, especially for Adrian and me.

Pirógo le strugurlása - Boiled flat noodles that had been boiled in honey-sweetened water and colored with saffron. The noodles were laid in an oblong dish and then thickly spread with a mixture of currants, raisins and cream cheese, then more noodles, more mixture, then finished with a layer of noodles.

Sármi - cabbage stuffed with ground beef and chopped ham with cooked rice, salt, black pepper and instead of jalapeños Jackson added Bell peppers, then they were simmered in tomato soup for an hour. Bokeli - Wheat bread made with soda but no yeast, with crumpled fried bacon stirred into the dough before baking.

With our main meal we drank stong hot coffee, then dessert was served. Galúshki were small dumplings made from flour and water flavoured with sugar and almonds, then boiled in milk were a joy to my sweet tooth. Then came the piece de' resistance..Románo tcháyo - boiled tea that was served in fluted dessert glasses filled with mashed peaches, apricots and strawberries. Jackson had me hold a sugar cube between my teeth as I drank the tea, then proposed a wedding toast..may the gods of our ancestors shower you with life's blessings, turning all sorrows into lessons learned for the path ahead. "

As the dishes were cleared away, my eyes grew heavy and I yawned. " That's a signal for us to leave and give these young people some much needed privacy. " Jackson winked and everyone followed him out the front door. Dr. Franco spoke to Adrian in private for a moment then they all piled into Angelo's car and left.

" Dr. Franco says I'm to put you to bed right now, Nancy. " We laughed and walked to Lorraine's room. It was all I could do to keep my eyes open as Adrian helped me undress and slip into one of his shirts." I love you, my beautiful wife. " Adrian murmured sweet words against my hair as I fell into a deep sleep the moment my head hit the pillows. In my dreams were 2 glossy black crows, a partnership of balance and harmony in their quest to bond with each other. While they perched on a treelimb, the coyote walked beneath them, howling that truth dwells within the coyote's trickster medicine, the paradox of wise sage and foolish prankster. The teacher spirit, playful and mischievious, yet equally capable of contemplation and introspection. As the crows observed the coyote, a southwind rose, ruffling their own fine feathers. Night-time fell and the full moon's light shone on the coyote as she called to her family. The 2 crows conversed with each other. The first crow said, maybe she's rallying others for the hunt or to chase off intruders..the second crow said, maybe she's in search of a mate beside whom she will journey the rest of her life until she finds ultimate fulfillment on her pathway.

When I woke, Adrian's blue eyes watched me closely. " How are you feeling this morning, Mrs. Conner? "" Mrs. Connor..I like the sound of that, Adrian. " Then I told him about my dreams, and he offered his own explanation.

Crows are very social, seeking companionship and the interaction of others with compulsion, fearing to be alone with their own company. They need to discover and develop an inner self relationship, facing themselves in honesty and truth. As the crows observed the coyote, a southwind rose, ruffling their own fine feathers. The joy of warm discovery in this breeze carries the powers of childlike trust, faith, knowledge and understanding forged in the fires of Experience, Innocence and the ability to heal through the use of Herbs and Plants.

" Since your babies were conceived in late January or early February, then it's safe to say they'll most likely arrive in October..that month houses the crow birth totem, and the two crows are the twins you carry. Animal spirits travel with us on a daily basis, teaching us their lessons, and the coyote has chosen to travel with you..associating her spirit within you until your destiny is learned and the chosen path is shown to you. " He offered me his wrist and I fed greedily.

To travel life's path with Adrian meant wholeness and oneness.." Make love to me, Adrian..I want to be your wife in every way. " He drew in his breath and started the mating ritual.

" I've cleansed my heart, soul and body this morning, and I would ask you do the same..shower while I make our room presentable. " I turned the hot water knob on, and stepped into the stream of water..

" Great Goddess Kermes Twa,
as I make myself ready to accept Adrian as my husband,
banish all my fears and frustrations,
bringing to light love eternal,
from my body, heart and soul
to return to him in full force. "

After I finished, I returned to Lorraine's room..Adrian had spread dried flowering broom on the floor and lit numerous red, white, and orange candles that spilled forth fragrances of roses, vanilla and honeysuckle. " This broom is used to bless weddings and the candles have their own specific

attributes..the red imbues love, passion, sexuality, and spirituality..the orange brings prosperity, encouragement, abundance and justice, and the white showers us with purity, peace, and courage to face any and all obstacles. " He sat in the middle of the bed in a flowing white robe and I joined him..we faced each other and he gathered my hands in his, and we synchronized our breathing. " The first magic of the marriage vows is to honor your partner, by embracing the inner lover which resides in their soul in order to establish a stronger connection of intimacy that leads to identity. He removed his robe, then uncrossed my legs and smoothed them with his hands.." Let your legs always close any distance we've put between us, physically, mentally or spiritually. " I sat on his lap as he used his robe like a rope, bringing it around my back, then wound it behind his back and tied it, bringing us closer together in the bonds of love. His hands traveled up and down my back, bring shivers of delight to my senses. " Never turn your back on the man who loves you with all his heart and soul. " He placed his hand on my heart and mine on his..The union of our hearts will withstand the turmoil of this life, strengthening us each and every day. " He carressed my face with his gentle hands, then my lips with his own as he kissed me long and deep.." May each word that passes your lips be filled with the taste and thought of me, my love. " Then he kissed me again to seal his love.

I placed his hands upon my breasts, and felt my nipples harden.." May my breasts always nourish and sustain you, bringing you comfort from the harshness of a cruel and unfeeling world. " His lips were warm and soft as he began sucking on them and suddenly the hardness of his manhood was deep inside my body..we rocked back and forth in gentle urgency..I savored new thoughts and emotions that had laid dormant inside of me, a summer butterfly emerging from a dark cocoon. We held each other tightly in the afterglow of making love.

At first I thought it was just the wind blowing down the chimney, but soon the words became clear.. " You can't delay going home any longer. " The Great Goddess spoke, leaving no doubt in my mind that home meant DuMond House. Her last word shocked me into action. " There is danger if you remain here any longer. "

" Adrian, we have to go, now..before something happens. " We packed in haste..Adrian remebered his mother's papers and paintings and my trunk, then we got into his Bronco. As soon as Jackson's cabin was out of sight, Adrian asked me what was wrong..his question was answered when we

heard a big boom and a great ball of fire coming from where the cabin had stood.

" We'll leave for France tonight. " Adrian withdrew two firstclass airline tickets from his pocket as I removed my cellphone and called Angelo to fill him in.

Chapter 39

We went to Angelo's townhouse and they were gathered around the tv, watching the morning news. The newsanchor was showing pictures of a black hole where Jackson's cabin used to be. Police and firemen milled about.." City detectives and forest rangers are looking for clues as to what happened here just a few short hours ago. "

" Thank god you 2 are all right.." Valera hugged us first and was followed by Jackson, Angelo and Dr. Franco. " None of us should be here when the questions start. "

" Adrian and I are leaving for France on the next flight out of here..the only place any of us will be safe is at DuMond House. "

Angelo, Valera and Dr. Franco followed Adrian, Jackson and me to the airport, where tickets were waiting to be picked up. Our flight was called a short time later and we entered the dark interior of the airplane. Dr. Franco took the seat beside me. She held my wrist and took my pulse. " This is not a good sign, Nancy..unless you take time to rest your body and soul, the lives of your babies will be in jeopardy. "

Valera handed me another small vial of fresh violet juice as Adrian took the seat beside me. He held my hand, then kissed my cheek.." I love you, Mrs. Connor. " I laid my head on his shoulder and slept till the plane touched down. We passed through customs with no trouble, and Angelo hailed a taxi, giving the driver the DuMond House address.

Traffic was heavy until we reached the suburbs. " Does anything look familiar to you, Valera? "

Desiree' was all eyes as she took in the sights.

" Not really Desiree', but you can't expect things to remain the same after so

many years. "

The driver turned his right blinker on and turned into a long curving driveway lined with weeping redwoods and soon he pulled up in front of a grey stoneworked house. " Now this, I remember."

Desiree's joy was contagious as she ushered us into the foyer, which also served as a cloak and boot room. I flipped a wall switch to give us some light, but there was no electricity forthcoming. I figured there were no phones in service either. I turned around, but the cabbie had left our bags on the front step and a trail of dust in his wake. There were pegs across both walls and recessed areas for muddy, wet shoes. A grand staircase rose to our right, but Desiree' opened double doors to the left. " This was Uncle Joshua's haven from the world at large. There were authentic ship lanterns..there was oil in them and Adrian lit the wicks and the flooring warmly glowed in geometric-patterned parquet. A wooden wall railing was midway between the ceiling and floor..the bottom half was wallpapered in wide segments of slate blue, contrasting with smaller stripings of bright red and white. The top portion was clean white, setting off the many pictures and portraits adorning it. All eyes focused on an oil painting prominently displayed above the fireplace. Desiree' sighed in contentment as she waved her hand and said, " This clippership is Goddess Of The Sea.

Surrounding the square cherrywood table were cloth-covered cushioned chairs that matched the slate blue of the walls, their curved legs inlaid with ebonized dolphin designs.

The room was large enough to house a spectacular grand piano..the rosewood gleamed and shone in polished splendor and Desiree' and Bethanie were both amazed when Adrian played one of their mother's favorite songs by W. W. Balfe.. the words to ' Then You'll Remember Me ' seemed fitting for both our lives..

' When other lips and other hearts
Their tales of love shall tell,
In language whose excess imparts
The power they feel so well.
There may, perhaps, in such a scene
Some recollection be,
Of days that have as happy been,
And you'll remember me. '

If you wish to rest, your room is upstairs, the 3rd door on the left.

Annelle opened the door and I would swear before a judge and jury that a lovely French garden greeted me..it was an exact replica of my bedroom in Springfield. Climbing red roses on a creamy white trellis papered the walls and stretched across the ceiling, giving the appearance of a rose arbor in full bloom. The floor was highly polished oak, the color of freshly turned earth, and the bedside area rug matched the bedspread and window curtains of periwinkle blue, reminding me of the sky on a clear day. In the corner was a mirrored cherrywood armoire to hold all my dresses, stenciled with butterflies of gold, orange, and red. The small writing desk that I used for my studies.

outside scenery. There were weeping redwoods, yellow poplars, cedars, and oak trees in abundance that lent shade to green manicured lawns, while boxwood hedges separated many smaller areas of graceful garden flowers. Off in the distance was an enormous clear paned greenhouse..My eyes widened on a central focal point of two intertwining rows of brilliant red roses and pure white lilies shaped into hearts..situated in the exact middle, light reflected in bright glitters as water plumed into the air, then cascaded from a 3-tiered fountain.

We strolled on the main path under the weak winter's sun, underneath bare tree branches until we came to the greenhouse entrance. Adrian opened the door and I was immediately reminded of my first walk with Marcus. The heady scent of roses and lilies filled my nostrils as Desiree' chose a walkway that meandered towards the middle of the garden. We walked across an arched wooden bridge situated above a small babbling brook which flowed through the estate and passed benches where one could sit and contemplate in quiet solitude. Here and there we stopped to stare at statues of whimsical animals and dour frowning dieties. The 3-tiered fountain loomed in majestic proportions and the cooling liquid sprinkled us in spattering gaiety. Adrian kissed me. " I love you, Adrian, " but deep within the secret reaches of my heart and soul I whispered, " I love you, Marcus. "

Adrian and I made love that night, but the next morning I began spotting, and Dr. Franco came to our room and examined me. " You've been under a great deal of mental and physical stress recently and my orders to you are

complete bedrest for at least 5 weeks and then I'll decide if you can be up and about. "

Bethanie said whatever you need to do to keep our babies healthy and Desiree' didn't mind in the least as she regaled us with stories of her life at DuMond House. Adrian and I spent time bonding as man and wife, but on Saturday, March 28th, things began to change. Spring came early and Adrian, Valera, and Dr. Franco developed cabin fever and took a trip into town..Adrian for music and art supplies, Valera for medicinal herbs, and Dr. Franco to see some medical experts in the pregnancy field.

I had the house to myself and was on the verge of sneaking downstairs when I heard a knock at the door..I assumed it was Valera or Dr. Franco so I said, " It's unlocked. "

The door opened and there stood Marcus, a bemused grin on his face as he closed and locked the door. " Now that we have some privacy.." He gave me a folder containing a sheaf of legal papers. " Look at our signatures, signed in blood. " It was a marriage certificate dated the night I had first been intimate with Marcus and the only name I recognized besides Marcus's and mine was that of one Dr. Marion Franco. " Your virginity and love are priceless jewels in my eyes, and could only be given within the bonds of holy matrimony. " Before I could protest, his lips captured mine, and although I wanted to resist, it was futile as my love for him came to the forefront. Then he presented me with my marriage certificate to Adrian. " Your complete pleasure belongs exclusively to me, not to any other man. " He struck a match, and I watched as flames engulfed the life I thought I had with Adrian. " It's almost time for us to leave. "

As if on cue, Dr. Franco breezed through the door. " I told you it was a mistake to rush into marriage with Adrian. " She examined me. " Both you and your babies are doing well, and I forsee no problems to short distance travel. "

Desiree' was all smiles, while I felt confused and torn. That's when Dr. Franco took the opportunity to stick my arm with a needle, and I drifted off to sleep. I woke up in a room with no windows to the outside world, and no idea as to where I was. " Take a deep breath, Nancy, and tell me what you smell. "

I inhaled and the essence of ripe purple fruit came to mind. " Grapes? "

" Not just grapes, you ninny, but the aroma of wine in the making. " Desiree' did a little jig. " I think we're at Turlough. " To my amazement, our door wasn't locked and we walked into a cavernous room.." Let me get my bearings. " Desiree' turned to her left and we walked between two rows of wooden wine casks to a massive oak door. We pushed on it and it swung inward with no sound.

" Natalia often mentioned the infamous Turlough Chapel, but told me never to enter. " The stoneworked walls shimmered with an eerie glow. I brushed away cobwebs from my face and hair as I looked at two rows of hardwood pews. On the wobbly altar lay 2 slim black leatherbound books tied together with red ribbons. There was no lettering on the outside, and as I reached out and touched them, the old saying, 'Curiosity killed the cat' immediately came to mind. Desiree' and Bethanie put their heads together and giggled like schoolgirls playing hooky..I felt their excitement envelope me and I slipped the books into my pocket for safekeeping, paying scant attention the warning sign.

" We need to get back to our room before anyone notices we're gone. " I slipped back into bed, and untied the book ribbons..a piece of parchment paper fell out and I read the words..Once the gates of hell have been opened, they cannot be closed by any means, other than by the greatest sacrifice of all. I was going to finger Desiree's necklace and assure myself that all would be fine, but it had been replaced by an emerald holly wreath, encrusted with small rubied berries.

My old life faded from view and was replaced by a new one.

I met Joseph Adams in the winter of 1972 when he was a struggling street artist and I was a student at the University of Paris. My parents had passed away and I was left fairly well off with a trust fund and house that I inherited from them. Joseph and I were soulmates and married just a few months later.

Life was pleasant and we were absorbed in each other, but after a few years had passed I felt faint stirrings to become a mother, and the desire deepened each day, but doctors told me I couldn't conceive. DuMond House had its

own little chapel with the main entrance on the outside..every day I went and knelt in front of the hardwood altar and prayed for a miracle to happen. One stormy night in early March, I found 2 slim black leatherbound books with no lettering on the outside, tied together with red ribbons.

I slipped the books into my pocket for safekeeping and went upstairs to the room I shared with Joseph. That evening when he was asleep, I had a burning desire to see the inner contents of those books and underneath the full yellow moon I made my way to the knot garden..there was an abundance of trees near the back edge of the property and I thought I saw fireflies flickering through the leaves, and a chant of some sort came wafting on the breeze. Curiosity goaded me on and I went in that direction, walking quietly through the woods and came upon a small secluded clearing in the midst of the oak trees, hidden far away from prying eyes or outside view. On the far side were holly bushes loaded with clusters of bright red berries that looked like drops of fresh blood oozing..I had a deep desire to turn tail and run, but felt hands on my shoulders. " Who invited you to our worship service? " Other voices echoed that sentiment as I was spun around. " Hold out your hands to me! " I did and he took the book that I held. " I see you've brought your invitation. " The coven leader welcomed me with open arms. " The Great Goddess only makes herself known to the chosen few. " I was brought into their circle, then kissed in turn by each of the 13 members. The leader glanced in my direction and offered thanks. " Hella Dracon, thank you for guiding and directing Lousanne DuMond Adams in you omnipotent ways..she will be given the honor and privilege of reading from 'The Laws Of True Worship'.

" As we lay the candles down one by one
The flames of love are sent to you
The darkness is our love for you
Their blending is our inspiration
The balance a continuation
A well of deepness our desire "

While I read, the leader placed black pillared candles around the edge of a deep pool of cold well water and lit each of them. The candles flickered in the darkness, and the coven members left, one by one, until only their leader was left. He gathered my hands in his. " Go home and make love to your husband and tonight you'll conceive. "

Making love to Joseph was always sweet and natural, and he thought nothing of my waking him in the middle of the night. My period was late by one week, and on March 21st I took a home pregnancy test that came out positive. I had been told not to breathe a word to Joseph, but to return to the clearing on March 21st at midnight. The leader welcomed me with open arms. " Just as our spring equinox ritual fortells of burgeoning life, we have been truly blessed by Hella Dracon..Lousanne, our newest member is with child. "

The coven fell to their knees in praise and thanksgiving to their goddess..when they had finished, I was instructed to fall on my knees and ofer homage. I had never been a religious person, but found it easy to offer praise for becoming pregnant. " Great Goddess, I don't know your thoughts or ways, but am truly thankful you have thought enough of me to grant my greatest wish..show me the true path to your heart and love so that I may follow where you lead..Amen. "

Everyone seemed pleased with my words, and a bonfire was lit.." As the mystery of life unfolds, so will your plans for Mother and Babe. "

and when I hold up my hand there will be silence so our older members can chant the necessary response. "

" ' In the early morning light I held the book Father Quimper had given to Phillip and me on our wedding night tight against my breast and remembered his parting words..' "

The response was given. " 'Once the gates of hell have been opened, they cannot be closed by any means, other than by the greatest sacrifice of all. ' "

" ' I grew up believing that outsiders were one and the same. ' "

The group as one pointed to me. " ' Nothing more than people who would use you for their own purposes, then cast you aside like an old tattered rag, but the winds of fate in one's life cannot be denied. ' "

" ' I chanced to meet Phillip Connor when he was ten and I was seven..even then I knew

I'd marry him. He was raised by his aunt and uncle after his own parents died on their 3rd wedding anniversary. Phillip and his cousin Raven always

accompanied Raven's father to our stables because our horses were the best money could buy. My father never allowed me to be alone with them or speak to them, but children always find a way to get together. We played and laughed in the warm sunshine near the river. I well remember the days I'd sneak away from camp and spend time with Phillip at his Aunt and Uncle's home..it was so much different than the tent I lived in with my parents. Reven and Annelle Aleanse always treated me with kindness and respect and they made me feel more like a valued family member than just a friend of the boys, even though my customs and religious beliefs were very different from theirs. Raven and his parents always attended regular Christian Church services, but Phillip was being groomed by a local priest named Father Quimper in order to establish a church and mission in America.

When Phillip turned 13, he began to spend more and more time away from his family, studying for the priesthood, but always found time to be with me. My family fell upon hard times, and Phillip devised a plan for us to always be together by offering my father a huge sum of money for my hand in marriage. Father was hesitant at first, but soon came round as creditors began hounding him to pay what he owed to them. I didn't even mind the fact that I would become an outcast myself because I loved Phillip far more than anything to do with my heritage.

Phillip proposed to me on the night he was no longer considered a legal ward of his aunt and uncle, but the only way we could marry was for me to be part of his holy initiation ceremony. He explained that I'd be more than honored as no other female had been allowed to partake in the ritual without undue harm befalling them. I agreed to receive the great spirit of Hella Dracon into my heart and soul and act as she commanded me. ' "

I was very engrossed in Sabrina's tale, but Desiree' shuddered as the coven responded. " ' The night was dark and starless..red candles lit our way to the catacombs beneath the Nancy Cathedral. I was led to an inner room and told to remove all my clothing and adornments, then cover my nakedness in robes of purest white. I dressed and waited until Father Quimper knocked on my door and I followed him to a raised dais where Phillip stood proud and tall in black novice robes. Thirteen monks came and bowed before us, then cut their wrists, producing blood which flowed into a crystal chalice. Father Quimper handed the sacred cup to Phillip and me and we drank of the intermingled life force together. Phillip raised my wrist to his mouth and

began the marriage ritual. He drank of my life and love for only him. ' Sabrina, I swear on all I hold holy that I'll love only you, being your nourishment now and forever. ' In turn, he gave his wrist to me and I repeated the words to him. ' "

" ' After the ceremony we immediately set sail for the great land of America in 1897 where we settled near the Deerfield River in North Central Massachusetts. We settled into our home and to the outside world we were well renown horsebreeders. ' "

Prayer is essential in maintaining the relationship between the Goddess and her chosen ones. When you first arise say your Morning Prayer; we fell on our knees in homage,

Hella Dracon, Theophanic Goddess of Blood,
the evilness of your kingdom has come to bring hell upon the earth for the unbelievers.
we thank you for giving us our daily bread, the sacrifice of innocent humanity
let our sinful natures praise you as we
bring about the trials and tribulations that you seek our spirits,
hearts and souls belonging to you forever and ever.

Although Phillip and I had married and vowed to love each other eternally, we had not been allowed physical intimacy until this moment. The Great Goddess had promised us a son in our second year of marriage, and to ensure unwanted pregnancies I was to drink a cup of diluted pennyroyal each day for 2 weeks, leading up to my menstrual cycle. After Phillip and I made physical love for the first time, we would fast the rest of the day, singing songs of praise and praying prayers to Hella Dracon.

Noontime Prayer

Blaec Toth Snaca, God of Utter Chaos,
you turn the night shadows into mourning death
assulting the pure of heart with black reproach
showing no mercy for the meek
let your desecrations and abominations always rule the world

Evening Prayer

Hella Dracon and Blaec Toth Snaca

Grant the world your endless possibilities

No sanctuary, no peace, no prosperity, no law

No hope, no trust, no mercy, no love

Except that of bestowing upon you

Innocence in bloodbaths as is your due

On Wednesday Evening,

Come to me humbly, wearing the white and black robes of my temple,
splattered with holy blood

your faces writ with the signs of my ownership;

Sum fine which means I am the End

Friday

Hella Dracon, you give the sting of eternal death and damnation

Through small sacrifices of animal blood

An example of what is to come

Saturday

Blaec Toth Snaca, cover us in darkness

As your venom circulates through our collective system

Keep us safe, while we spread peril among those who do not believe in
unjustice and hatred

Sunday

Purify us with the blood of hate and revenge, so we may be more than
adopted members of your family..

I was lucky in that I never conceived, but the one time and bore our son.. the

chosen one and will carry on the family heritage and name, down through all generations. By law he would marry the only daughter of the Blood Keeper and his wife..the keeper and his wife were both sacrificed after the marriage rites were said replaced by a new priest, whose wife was blessed with only one daughter, thus ensuring no interbreeding and weakening of the gene pool. All other coven members were told to reproduce in abundance. Having more than one child goes against what I have taught..retain your purity and your will retain your life as High Priest and Priestess.Clan rules stated that if a female was produced by the chosen couple, she and they would offered as a living sacrifice to Hella Dracon and Blaec Toth Snaca, and another couple chosen to replace them as high priest and priestess.

Every 3 months we were to hold celebrations to Hella Dracon, offering sacrifices from the outside world..Our gypsy vampire coven worshipped Hella Dracon and Blaec Toth Snaca with the sustenance of fresh innocent blood.virgins, both male and female, and once a year, a new born babe. That was the only way we could retain our lives and souls. Befriend the sacrifice and when ready tell them they were to honored at a feast held in their name..no other had been so honored..given a potent drink of so they would feel no pain, except the pain of the non-protected believer. While they still lived and breathed, they were bled until empty and dry..all partook of their blood, and then the keeper was killed and his blood sprinkled on the holly bushes and stones set around the holy well.

As soon as Nancy read the parchment paper and drifted off to lala land, she began bleeding, and that was only stopped when Adrian gave his own life in order to save hers..he was keeper of innocent blood and it's his innocence that changes Marcus, Nancy, and their babies.

After Nancy finds out about her parents and why they were killed, she has no qualms about going back to the coven, so she can destroy them, before they destroy her.

This is what I meant by being close inside the enemy's camp, Nancy. "

Adrian and I spent many pleasant hours in the blooming knot garden, and I grew bigger with each passing day, feeling our babies come to life with joy

and thanksgiving. Adrian, Valera, Dr. Franco and I celebrated the summer solstice at midnight on Sunday, June 21st.

Valera led us to the same spot that the coven had held it's rituals. In front of the well she had built a firepit circle, laid with logs ready to be lit. Around the right side of the well were red candles, signifying the red of ripeness and abundance and on the left side were white candles, signifying the barrenness of the coming winter months.

In preparation she handed each of us a small pouch, then pointed to bowls filled with lavender and chamomile.." Let your sorrows and troubles mingle with the herbs, then place them within the pouch.

Valera began the ceremonial rites with words of wisdom as she lit the holy bonfire..

Kermes Twa, Great Goddess of bright moonlight
You have bestowed on us, your true believers and children
All things good and merciful from your unlimited bounty.."
One by one we threw our pouches into the roaring flames
As the bonfire slowly died and only small embers remained..

" Tonight as is your custom of equality
You hand over the reigns of the world's ownership to your husband,
Aquealis,

His half of the year to waning winter darkness.."
Valera stirred the ashes with her right index finger
the wind scattered them in all directions
" May your pain and anguish be blown away,
to be nothing more than a whisper on the wind.."

The celebration of blood christening just before death..readings from Sabrina's journal and the Laws of True Worship.

They have information about Nancy's parents and why they were killed..at the very end Nancy is giving birth and Adrian rushes in and kills Sheridan and is killed as well, and the group changes its spectrum, when they see Marcus deliver, not one, but two babies for the coven to see.." Blood and tears are our humanity, the GreatGoddess has appeared. "

Lorraine's parents fled to America to escape the punishment of death by having a girl, and Nancy's parents found out about the human sacrifices and went to see Marcus to tell him..that's when they were killed..but by whom??

.....

That image faded from view and I woke to find myself inside a nightmare at the Turlough Chapel. I was still in my wedding attire, kneeling in prayer. I felt hands on my shoulders, but didn't have time to react as I was turned around by a person wearing the red-hooded cape and cowl of Blaec Toth Snaca. I reached out my hands and tried to tear his mask away, so I could see who was behind the disguise, but I felt cold scaly skin, and realized I was face-to-face with the Lord Of Chaotic Darkness. He placed Sheridan's scarf of heavy silk, the color of a scarlet tanager, with small black triangular corners around my neck and his flicking tongue caressed my lips and then he hissed. " I never forget what rightfully belongs to me..Joseph Adams wasn't your father, I am. You were conceived in evil, which you and your children shall bear throughout your generations. Your name is written in my book of death as my daughter of destruction, Nhance, from which the name Nancy evolved.. the name you were given at birth, a name of disruptive signals that I hold in the hollow of my hand. " The blood drained from my face and I fainted dead away in the realization that the scene I had witnessed didn't include my father and Sher, but Blaec Toth Snaca and my mother.

" Arise, my daughter. " My father took my hands and kissed both of my cheeks. " The time has come for you to do my bidding. "

" Whatever you ask of me, I'll do. "

" Our friend Adrian has had an awful accident and as a result, suffers from memory loss. Angelo has taken him back to America to recuperate and I want you to go to him and when all of my plans have come to fruition, you, Adrian, and the twins will start a brand new coven of chaos and darkness, the likes of which the world has never seen. "

I was elated. " Does this mean Sher won't continue her stranglehold on everyone? "

“ Your mother’s inner purity and innocence allowed the darkness of my powers to increase dramatically, because she willingly gave herself to me. ” I was puzzled by that statement. “ Opposites attract on a myriad of levels. Your mother thought she could change me, but instead, I changed her to suit both our needs. When Sher killed your mother, she signed her own death warrant and will get her comeuppance in more ways than one, I promise you. Now we must make haste, before Adrian awakes. ”

My father had made arrangements for us to fly back to America and Adrian. We arrived at the property that Adrian had inherited from his mother’s side of the family and drove past the place where White Wolf Lodge had stood. There was nothing left to see and we traveled on to the Old Deerfield River Compound in North Central Massachusetts.. I was expecting to see it in a rundown condition, but it was slowly being renovated into its original splendor and I danced for joy. The ivory colored house was two stories and the flat roof had a balustrade around it. The rounded front reminded me of my pregnancy with narrow side windows flanking the recessed front doorway. There were balconies at each of the bedroom windows, but most of them were just for show. The exceptions being the room I’d be sharing with Adrian, and my father’s room. The sides and back had open air porches for outdoor gatherings and meeting.

The simple outside belied what lay within. The Baroque style was theatrical and extravagant as befitted a huge rockstar who had made it big as an overnight success. Anyone who entered never forgot. The flooring was what first caught the eye..it was painted with geometric patterns like those of a contemporary parterre garden, known as broderie. The Gemini motifs were taken from an ancient Egyptian embroidery pattern and were set off by gold-gilded walls and silvered ceilings that reflected flickering electric candle-light chandeliers in the central ball room. Marble statues of intertwined couples graced the four corners of the room and against the far back wall was the staging area for live entertainment.

The living room had black and white marble squares..each square was clear-glazed in order to hold intricate snake designs, made from rubies and emeralds. There were numerous knole sofas with high-cushioned arms that were raised and lowered to form daybeds..the material used was finest silk from China, and had the same designs as the marble squares. The walls were silkscreen prints of fiery dragons being offered sacrificial virgins. There were various displays of rare coins, prize-winning medals, Adrian’s precious

stones, and religious manuscripts hidden in plain sight.

The dining area had a massive ivory table with intricate cuneiform marking set into its carved mother of pearl legs. The chairs were ivory thrones set atop pyramids. The plates were solid gold and the silverware, pure silver. The drinking utensils were solid gold, with handles shaped like snakes. The library housed many books, but I had reserved one wall for the gold records I knew that Adrian would receive for his original works. There were wing chairs or chairs with low, wide seats, high backs and scrolled arms of polished oak; they were upholstered in heavy Egyptian cotton, patterned in deep green holly leaves and bright red berries. The floor was also polished oak and matched the chairs.

The bedroom was of my own making. The walls were adorned with intricate crewl-work; family pictures of my father and mother..Adrian and his Uncle Angelo, and Adrian and me in all my glorious pregnancy..and when the twins were born there'd be a crewl-work of them also. I was going to do more decorating, but wanted Adrian to add his contributions as well. The bed was round and the cover matched the color of Adrian's piercing blue eyes and I left the room at that.

“Nhance, it's time for us to go visit Adrian in the hospital..the doctors feel that he'll wake up soon.” It took us about an hour to reach Springfield.

We entered the building and rode the elevator to the 5th floor, and the nurse on duty told us that Adrian couldn't have any visitors except for next of kin. “I'm Adrian's wife and this is my father.”

She looked skeptical. “I need to see some form of identification.”

That's when Angelo showed up. “It's all right, Nurse Smith..I was witness to their marriage, myself.” He hugged me and whispered in my ear, “I'm here for your protection.”

I didn't know what he meant by those words, but saw Adrian for the first time with my own sight. I took his hand and he squeezed mine hard, then opened his eyes. “Who are you?”

Chapter 42

Tears came to my eyes. “ Don’t you remember me, Adrian, I’m your wife, Nancy. ” I placed his hand on my pregnant belly. “ We’re going to have twins in October. ”

He looked at Angelo, who nodded yes. “ I’m sorry, but the last thing I clearly remember was playing my gig at Precious Metals last January..”

“ This is July 1st and many things have happened since then. ”

“ Apparently so. ” He paid no attention to me as the doctor came into the room. “ When can I get out of here and back to my music? ”

“ Seeing as you’ve just come out of your coma, I need to totally evaluate you, mentally as well as physically. ” He looked in our direction. “ Adrian has had enough visitors for one day..you can come back tomorrow. ”

I took the doctor aside. “ I’m Adrian’s wife and I’d like you to limit his visitors to me, my father, and Angelo. ”

“ Of course, Mrs. Connor..fill out the paperwork at the nurse’s station. ”

I finished and signed the forms. “ Daughter, Angelo has some places he wants to take you and I’ve agreed. ”

I kissed my father’s cheek and followed Angelo to his car. “ I know you’re wondering where we’re going..just wait and see. ” He drove towards the downtown area, and soon the cityscape gave way to the warehouse district on the outskirts of town fronting Redrose River.

I was surprised to see a new building where Precious Metals had stood. It now sported the name, Adrian’s Element. “ I bought it in hopes that Adrian would make a full recovery and begin his musical career once more. Would you care to see the inside? ” We got out of the car and he opened the front door. The afternoon sun dimly lit the interior and there wasn’t much to see except four walls.“ Electricians are coming later today to install basic lighting and a state of the art sound system, but other than that the club is yours and Adrian’s to do with as you will. ”

“ I know why you’re doing this for Adrian..”

He put his finger to my lips. “ I know who and what you think you are, but the day will come when you’ll arrive, but at the moment it’s best to let sleeping dogs lie. This is all according to the will of the Great Goddess. ”

A bright light dazzled inside my mind, but quickly faded away as I heard faint girlish voices coming from outside the door. “ We heard that Adrian has come back home and is going to open this club.. ” Two teen-agers stopped dead in their tracks, disappointed at the stark interior. “ We also heard that Adrian got married..is that true? ”

I heard my father’s voice.. “ These girls are the answer to solving our problem with Sher. Get close to them! ”

“ What are your names? ”

“ I’m Dess and she’s Bess. ”

Two innocents that I could use to my own advantage. “ My name is Nancy, and it’s true that Adrian is married. ” I showed them my pregnant belly. “ He’s had an accident and wants to return to writing and singing, but has to take things slowly for the moment. ” I laughed. “ As you can see, a lot of work has to be done here before the club can open..maybe you can give me some ideas as to what you’d like to see and I’ll run them by Adrian, myself. ” They seemed skeptical. “ I won’t be able to see him until tomorrow, but why don’t the both of you come by my home tonight about 8pm and we’ll see what we can come up with. ” I gave them my address.

“ We’ll be there. ” They laughed and giggled, then went on their merry way to wherever. While Angelo conversed with the workers, I went across the street to an abandoned warehouse. It had a forsale sign in the dirty window and there was a car parked in front of it.

I walked through the unlocked door. “ I’m glad you’ve arrived. ” The man had on a brown sportscoat with a local real estate insignia on his breast pocket. “ Now if you’ll just sign these papers, our business will be concluded just as you’ve specified. ”

I wrote my name on the dotted line, he handed me the keys and left..I knew this would be the perfect spot for what I had in mind and no one would know I was the legal owner..it now belonged to the Coven Group.

“ Of course I do. ” The club walls gave the effect of reality, but were metal illusions of bright gold, shiny silver, burnished copper, and polished to a sheen brass in the minimal light. A waitress dressed in gold lame’ short shorts and halter-top led us to a square bronze table with matching chairs.

“ Your nightly visitations guided me, but even in my wildest fantasies I didn’t believe you’d become a reality. ” He crushed my hands in his. “ When we broke up eighteen months ago, and you refused my offer of marriage, I was crushed beyond repair. ” His eyes glittered, drawing me into their depths. “ I knew you’d return to me and I still find it hard to believe that we’re married and going to be parents. ”

Angelo's Classiques,

atrocities Phillip and I would add to as the years went by.

I read from the book..Laws of True Worship for the High Priest and Priestess.

The first year of marriage is dedicated to learning my ways..

Prayer is essential in maintaining the relationship between the Goddess and her chosen ones. When you first arise say your Morning Prayer; we fell on our knees in homage,

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the evilness of your kingdom has come to bring hell upon the earth for the
unbelievers.

we thank you for giving us our daily bread, the sacrifice of innocent
humanity let our sinful natures praise you as we
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Goddess had promised us a son in our second year of marriage, and to
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you turn the night shadows into mourning death
assaulting the pure of heart with black reproach
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let your desecrations and abominations always rule the world

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No sanctuary, no peace, no prosperity, no law
No hope, no trust, no mercy, no love
Except that of bestowing upon you
Innocence in bloodbaths as is your due

On Wednesday Evening,

Come to me humbly, wearing the white and black robes of my temple,
splattered with holy blood
your faces writ with the signs of my ownership;
Sum fine which means I am the End

Friday

Hella Dracon, you give the sting of eternal death and damnation
Through small sacrifices of animal blood
An example of what is to come

Saturday

Blaec Toth Snaca, cover us in darkness
As your venom circulates through our collective system
Keep us safe, while we spread peril among those who do not believe in
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Sunday

Purify us with the blood of hate and revenge, so we may be more than
adopted members of your family..

I was lucky in that I never conceived, but the one time and bore our son.. the chosen one and will carry on the family heritage and name, down through all generations. By law he would marry the only daughter of the Blood Keeper and his wife..the keeper and his wife were both sacrificed after the marriage rites were said replaced by a new priest, whose wife was blessed with only one daughter, thus ensuring no interbreeding and weakening of the gene pool. All other coven members were told to reproduce in abundance. Having more than one child goes against what I have taught..retain your purity and your will retain your life as High Priest and Priestess.Clan rules stated that if a female was produced by the chosen couple, she and they would offered as a living sacrifice to Hella Dracon and Blaec Toth Snaca, and another couple chosen to replace them as high priest and priestess.

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was the only way we could retain our lives and souls. Befriend the sacrifice and when ready tell them they were to honored at a feast held in their name..no other had been so honored..given a potent drink of so they would feel no pain, except the pain of the non-protected believer. While they still lived and breathed, they were bled until empty and dry..all partook of their blood, and then the keeper was killed and his blood sprinkled on the holly bushes and stones set around the holy well.

I closed the book as tears seeped from my eyes..sacrificing a child of one's own body, heart and soul went against everything that I believed in..I felt strong instinctual stirrings of Mothering devotion..I would fight tooth and nail to keep my babies from harm, even laying down my life for them.

I hadn't noticed Dr. Franco leave and Adrian take her place..he gave me his wrist to feed from, and blessed peace and calm flowed through my system for a few seconds as I knew Adrian felt the same way. Even though I had no right to ask, a question lingered in the back of my mind..I knew Marcus would protect his own flesh and blood, but what of a child not his own. I couldn't afford to have him find out, but I could plainly hear him say, " Be sure your sins will find you out. "

Most of my transgressions had come about since meeting Marcus and Sheridan.." And me. " Desiree' laughed. " The big question which remains is what sins did your parents commit to make Sheridan want them all dead? "

I went to the family chapel and fell on my knees, raising my hands in supplication to the Great Goddess, who had given me my husband and twins as the most wonderful gifts of all.

Did Sher or Marcus put the book where Nancy could find it..or was it mere coincidence?

" You're the High Priestess we've been waiting for..all hail Hella Dracon, Theophanic Goddess of Blood. "

I felt hard labor begin, and couldn't move myself from in front of Hella Dracon's sacred altar. Sher ran towards me, bloodlust in her heart and soul. Adrian was pale from bloodloss, but his eyes glowed with wolflike determination. He yanked Desiree's necklace from around my neck and it lit the entire room in crimson tones that glowed bright red as he held it in front of us, his body shielding mine..what happened next will always remain a blur, but I noticed a shadowy figure come up behind Sher, dressed in the garb of Blaec Toth Snaca..I was sure that he and Sher would deliver my babies, then offer them as living sacrifices, while Adrian and I were forced to watch, then they would use our blood to futher their own demon seed, but the snake mask fell away and I saw the contorted face of Marcus in hellbent rage..he pushed Sher and she fell hard on top of the crystal pendant that held one rubied drop of innocent blood inside..she screamed as its point pierced her evil heart and burst, releasing the innocence that kills into her bloodstream. Marcus pushed her off of us and we heard Adrian breathe his last words, " I'll always love you and our babies. "

Adrian faded away and as Marcus delivered my babies, we heard the voice of Kermes Twa speak.

" I am goddess of red, red blood
goddess of day and night
goddess of love and hate
goddess of weakness and might

life comes to those who surely wait
encompass the whole, be at one with your fate

Motto: Statu variabilis (Steadfast in changing)

Deities: Artemis, Diana; Hecate; Luna; Isis; Persephone.

Dice: 1+4 = Love+Mother (Water Hexactys); 3+1 = Family+Mother (Fire Hexactys).

Astragali: 1+4+1 = Love+Holy+Female.

Greek Letter = Epsilon: Exo = outside, beyond, outwards.

Trigram: :I: Name: K'an = the Abyssmal. Image: Water, Rain, Moon. The Second Daughter, associated with passion, danger, repetitive bending, penetration. West in Earlier Heaven.

Description

The High Priestess is a tall, young woman with a round, pale face and long, thick, moderately curly, platinum blond hair. She wears a long, midnight blue robe, decorated with six stars surrounding a central moon, and with flowers and fruit hanging from the borders. Her black mantle, drawn from behind, over her shoulders and up from behind her waist, is knotted in an X on her chest; her arms are bare. She looks like she might be pregnant, though we cannot be sure.

On her forehead is a silver disk with arcing serpents on each side, suggesting simultaneously crescent moons and horns; a garland of flowers is in her hair. Her right hand holds a glowing silver sistrum (sacred rattle), and her left, a golden vase, decorated on the base with pomegranates and palm leaves; its handle looks like a snake swollen with venom.

The High Priestess sits in a throne in a chariot, drawn by two horses (black on her left, white on her right). The background behind the chariot is hidden by its billowing canopy, in midnight blue with 27 stars, which is supported by two poles surmounted with silver crescent moons. The chariot emerges from a dark river which can be seen flowing behind her on either side of the canopy. The sides of the chariot are decorated with mugwort leaves. Cerberus, a three-headed black dog, sits beside her in the car.

Verse

The Shining Queen, who rules the velvet night, And nurtures nascent change, concealed from sight, Transforms and changes, wheeling light and dark, And seeks the Sun to sire the unseen spark. The watery depths bring forth the Child of Light.

Interpretation

The High Priestess represents the feminine components of the subconscious mind. She stands for those subconscious processes that are most hidden, those which invisibly nurture, develop, connect and relate, those which transcend duality. For, although she is a virgin priestess and represents all the eternally virgin goddesses, she is also the vehicle of hidden gestation and the First Mother in potentia, the concealed mother required to manifest the spiritual. As such she also represents the subconscious, synthetic processes of memory.

The activity of the High Priestess is symbolized by the abyssal water - impenetrably dark, infinitely deep, always mixing, flowing, seeking its own level; by yielding she is as forceful as the mighty river Ocean. Her tears are the healing dew, always striving to restore wholeness when division has gone too far.

Like the Moon, the High Priestess is steadfast in changing, for she is the principle of hidden change by cyclic growth and decline. She represents the oscillating balance of matter and spirit, for she turns her face alternately toward the earth and the sun. When she looks toward earth, she is the primary matter necessary for the manifestation of the spirit, the neutral vessel of good and evil. When she looks to the sun, she is the means of spiritual attainment, the Spiritual Bride and Mother, Sophia, the Redemptrix.

The High Priestess is pre-eminently occult, for her work is hidden. When she turns her face away, she vanishes into her own shadow (the new moon), and when she meets the sun in closest conjunction, she also hides his face - an occultation (eclipse). The High Priestess embodies the most spiritual aspects of the feminine.

Commentary

The High Priestess's lunar diadem reminds us that she is Mistress of the Pentacle.

"The mythology of the moon is an object lesson in female psychology" (Jung, MC 175). In the male, the lunar psychology manifests as the anima in the subconscious, which is predominantly represented by the dark of the moon. In the female, the lunar psychology is conscious, and is predominantly represented by the light of the moon. In contrast to the sharp, discriminating light of the sun, the light of the moon merges and relates. This "lunatic" logic cloaks itself in half-darkness or the "shimmer of innocence" (Jung, MC 179, 181).

In the female, the solar psychology manifests as the animus in the subconscious, which is represented by the Sol Niger (Black Sun). The woman's mind, comprising the light of the moon (conscious) and the dark sun (unconscious), is not so extreme in dark and light as the man's, which comprises the bright sun (conscious) and the dark moon (subconscious) (Jung, MC 181). We will see that II. Empress = bright moon, III. Emperor = bright sun, IV. High Priestess = dark moon, V. High Priest = dark sun. These are the four "personalities" present when man and woman come together (von Franz 152). At the subconscious level this may become a confrontation between the Sword and Cup, for "when animus and anima meet, the animus draws his sword of power and the anima ejects her poison of illusion and seduction" (Jung, A. 15). However, all four "personalities" manifest to varying degrees in all people.

Jung (A. 13-17) claims that the anima tends to be loyal, consoling, relating, an illusionist, a seductress, ambivalent, vain, touchy, sentimental, resentful and subject to irrational moods. (See V. High Priest for common characteristics of the animus.)

Hecate is Triformis (Three-formed) or Triceps (Three-headed) because: she rules the heavens as Selene during full moon; she rules the earth as Artemis during the waxing and waning moons, which are shaped like her silver bow; she rules the underworld as Persephone during the new moon (cf. Schimmel 60). Cerberus recalls both Hecate Triceps and her underworld connections.

The moon is a mediator, like Hermes, who stands between heaven and earth, facing each in turn, and thereby showing the downward and upward paths (Jung, MC 25). She rules all the waxing and waning phenomena in the world (von Franz 149-50). The *Carmina Burana* (Schmeller no. 1; Harrington 379; Whicher 262) say that Luna is steadfast in her changing (*statu variabilis*).

From Vincenzo Cartari's *Images of the Gods* (1571) and a letter of Annibale Caro (1562) we have the following description of the Moon-Isis: long and

abundant hair, lightly curled; on her forehead a polished object with snakes on either side and ears of corn above; a garland of wood and sunflowers or other flowers; a dress, to either her feet or her knees, very thin, and showing the colors white, yellow and red; or a shining black dress (black, white, yellow, red: the colors of the alchemical Great Work), decorated with stars and a central moon, flowers and fruits hanging from the border like tassels; bare arms; a lighted torch in her right hand and two snakes in her left; or her left hand holds a golden vase, decorated on the base with palm leaves, and with a snake-like handle, looking swollen with venom; she is in a chariot drawn by two horses, one white, one black, or drawn by a mule, or by steers with small horns and a white spot on the right flank. (Seznec 291-3)
<http://www.cs.utk.edu/~mclennan/BA/PT/Isis.gif>

Clayton (107) displays a statue of Isis that fits this description closely, though she holds a sistrum in her right hand. Selene is often depicted in splendid robes, rising out of the stream of Ocean in her chariot pulled by shining steeds (Larousse 143); see figure in Kerényi (197).

The numbers three, nine and 27 are sacred to the moon. The 27 stars on the canopy represent the days on which the moon is visible ($27 = 3 \times 9$, the third power of three). (Schimmel 60, 169, 238) The moon is an attribute of Artemis, and mugwort (*artemesia*) is a lunar herb (OCD, s.v. Artemis; Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* 25.36).

The alchemists say that Virgin Diana is the First Mother and the First Matter: *Prima Mater* and *Prima Materia*, the feminine transformative substance, the redemptrix (*soteira*) (Case 50; Jung MC 18). She is the Spiritual Bride and Mother (Case, 51, after Waite). So she is called *Mater Alchimia* (Mother Alchemy), the Matter of All Things, the Matrix, *Femina*, *Virgo* (Virgin) *Puella* (Girl) *Praegnans* (Pregnant), *Sophia*, *Luna* and even *Meretrix* (Whore), for she is "the vessel and the matter of good and evil" (Jung, MC 18, 20, 105). Plutarch says Selene is the Mother of the Cosmos; she is impregnated by Helios, the High Priest (Jung, MC 177). As is well known, matter, mater (mother) and matrix all derive from the same Indo-European root *mater-*, which means mother (AHD s.vv.).

As the anima represents and personifies the elements of the collective unconscious, so Luna represents the other six planets, and her metal Silver is the sum and essence of the spirits of the other six metals (Jung, MC 176). The six stars and the moon on the High Priestess's gown represent the seven metals and the seven planets.

In many old Tarot decks the High Priestess is called the Popess, who is commonly supposed to be the legendary Pope Joan, who became Pope by masquerading as a man (an activity which is singularly appropriate to the Saturnalia/Carnival presided over by the Magician). Her deception was exposed when she miscarried during a procession, a symbol of the hidden gestation which erupts unbidden into our awareness. Moakley (72-4) has shown that the Popess, who appears in the 15th century Visconti-Sforza Tarot, is most likely Sister Manfreda, a relative of the Viscontis who was elected Popess by the Gugliemites, named for Gugliema of Bohemia (d. 1281), who was thought to be an incarnation of the Holy Spirit. In line with my interpretation of this trump, the Gugliemites thought that Gugliema would descend to earth in 1300 to inaugurate a line of Popesses to replace the Popes, and preparations were made for Popess Manfreda to celebrate Mass in the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore (Rome). However, Manfreda was burned at the stake in that year and the sect was exterminated by the Inquisition.

The pomegranate, which is associated with Persephone and Demeter (see also II. Emperess), is a common symbol of the passive principle, marriage, fertility and childbirth (Biedermann s.v.; Goldsmith 200). The veil behind the Priestess in both the Rider-Waite and BOTA decks displays pomegranates and palms, which are female and male symbols, respectively (Case 52). Although palms are androgynous symbols of creation, I have given them a minor role, since they are predominantly Apollonian and solar (Biedermann s.v.; Goldsmith 21).

The descent into matter is a drug, which may be poisoning or healing, intoxicating or illuminating. Hecate sends the dog and the snake, for their bite may bring madness or the transformation of consciousness (Jung, MC 28); the gift of prophecy is often granted by a snake. The High Priestess shares her animals with her brother/husband, the High Priest. For example, both Selene and Helios are invoked as dogs (Jung, MC 146-7). Kalid (c. 700 CE) says that the stag, lion and cock are the animals of Luna and Persephone and of their male counterparts (Jung, MC 32). The snake and tiger are also lunar animals (Jung, MC 175).

Apollo and Artemis are, of course, both associated with the bow and arrow. Like Apollo, both Artemis and Hecate are called Hekebolos (Far-Darting), because they shoot from out of sight (Larousse 165, OCD, s.v.); the two gods represent the unseen operation of the subconscious mind: the sudden flash of insight, the intuitive leap. We will see (VI.Love) that Apollo and

Artemis (sun and moon) are brought together in love by another far-darter, Eros, the offspring of Hermes and Aphrodite (I. Magician and II. Empress) (Jung, MC 30).

Selene and Helios represent the totality of intuitive perception, female and male, for only they of all the gods saw the abduction of Kore (Larousse 165). They bore the Horae (Hours), which represent the seasons (OCD s.vv. Selene, Horae). The moon is the mother of the sun, as well as his spouse, which means that the unconscious is pregnant with consciousness, and gives birth to it (Jung, MC 175-7).

The High Priestess has many connections with water. First, Selene was the mother of Dew (Herse, Eerse or Ersa) by Zeus (OCD s.v. Selene; Larousse 143). Also, the tears of Isis (who was identified with Selene and Demeter), which are the dew, are healing, for with them she restored Osiris to wholeness, so she is called Soteira (Redemptrix). This substance is the Aqua Vitae (Water of Life) and the Aqua Permanens (Abiding Water), which unites whatever has been severed. (Jung, MC 19-20) Isis is also a powerful sorceress, a skill she learned when she sent her serpent to lie in the path of Ra, whom she also later healed (Larousse 19).

Isis is called the Star of the Sea and represents the fruitful, rich plains of Egypt, the prima materia, which brings forth life when fertilized by Osiris, the Nile flood (Larousse 19).

According to one myth, Hecate was a daughter of Zeus and Hera who polluted herself by stealing "Hera's rouge" and attending a woman in childbirth. She was purified and reborn out of the waters of Acheron, an underworld river. Hence she oversees purification and expiations specifically, and magic and enchantments generally. (Larousse 165-6) She is a healer, especially of the effect of scorpions, snakes and fevers (Clayton 107). She brings illumination in the night, that is, from the subconscious.

The moon represents the qualities of connection and relationship that characterize the Maternal Eros (Jung, Aion 12-3), for water is cold (joining) and wet (yielding). In contrast the sun represents the qualities of discrimination and cognition that characterize the Paternal Logos (loc. cit.), for fire is hot (separating) and dry (imposing). The High Priestess and High Priest will unite their water and fire in trump VI. Love (cf. Jung, A. 111), for Sol is the "heat of the firmament" and Luna is the "aetheric moisture" (Jung, MC 113-4). Also, the moon and her light are the humidum ignis (moisture of fire) (Jung, MC 175), and Sol is hidden like a fire in the depths of Luna's

water (Jung, MC 177).

The color blue is associated with Luna and she is called the Dark Water (to skoteinon hudor), who marries Sol, who is called Flowing Light (phaos rhuentes) (Jung, MC 149). Isis is also called Chemeia (The Black One), which reminds us that she is Mater Alchimia - Mother Alchemy (Jung, MC 18, 20).

The High Priestess's gown, sistrum and jug can be seen on a Roman statue of Isis (Clayton 107). The X on her chest reminds us that Hecate is the goddess of crossroads and suggests the four elements of material manifestation. The gown's representation of the night sky reminds us that Isis was sometimes identified with Nut, the Egyptian sky goddess (von Franz 51). The sistrum is an attribute of Isis as the Queen of Heaven. According to Plutarch, "The sistrum shows that whatever exists ought to be shaken and never cease from movement, but should be aroused and agitated as if it were asleep and its life quenched. ... [B]y means of movement generation frees nature." (Goldsmith 207)

The Knot of Isis, in the center of the X (Ions 70), represents the underlying unity of the four elements, the prima materia; esoterically this is identified with Light (Case 30-1), and the X cross is a monogram for LVX. The pendant ends of the Knot of Isis represent the tears of the moon, the healing dew of heaven (ros coelestis), the spirit, which is a universal agent of rejuvenation and revitalization that gives life to the prima materia (Biedermann s.v. dew). Together the Dew and Cross (Ros & Crux) form a pentagram (inverted), which represents spirit uniting the four elements (cf. Crossley II, 239-40n).

The throne is a symbol of Isis (ast, Auset) (Budge 79; Larousse 19), who is often shown wearing the cow horns and solar disk of Hathor (Ions 56-60) and carrying the ankh and papyrus scepter (Ions 56).

Many European Tarot decks have Juno and Jupiter in place of the Popess and Pope (High Priestess and High Priest).

I noted previously that the Pythagorean analysis suggests that Major Arcana 2 and 3 should be the High Priestess and High Priest and that 3 and 4 should be the Empress and Emperor. Further evidence is that the Empress and Emperor are commonly shown with Orbs, which are symbols of Earthly Authority and are Pentacles in the broad sense (i.e. mandala-like disks; see OED, 1st ed. s.v.). Conversely, the High Priestess and Priest are commonly

shown with Sceptres with represent Spiritual Authority (associated with Wands and Fire). There is already considerable variety in the arrangement of these four cards in the earliest records of the Tarot (Dummett 7). I've provisionally retained the Ferrara arrangement and the suit assignments of Kaplan (I.4), since this seems more consistent with a Jungian interpretation.

The reduced isopsephos also supports the Ferrara order. For H TRIMORFOS EKATH (He Trimorphos Hekate, Three-formed Hecate) we have 1732, which reduces to $2-3+7-1 = 5$; for H SKOTIA SELANA (He Skotia Selana, The Dark Moon) we have 896, which reduces to $6-9+8 = 5$. Both show that the High Priestess corresponds to the Pentad, which represents the eternal celestial spirit transcending the four mutable elements; the Pythagoreans call it Alteration, for it represents the impulse to ascend out of the mundane realm. (TA 32, 34-5, 41; see also the meaning of Epsilon, above, and the Fives in the Minor Arcana)

Motto:

Victoria sperata. (Victory hoped for.)

Deities:

Ares, Mars; Nike, Victoria.

Dice:

$2+3 = \text{Virtue+Male (Water)}$; $4+2 = \text{Virtue+Second (Fire)}$.

Astragali:

$1+6+3 = \text{1st Ogdoad+Virtue+Male (Victory)}$.

Greek Letter = Theta:

Thrasos = courage, boldness, confidence, audacity, rashness, impudence.

Trigram:

I:: Name: Chen = the Arousing. Image: Thunder. The First Son, associated with initiative, action, incisiveness, vehemence, strength. Southeast in the Earlier Heaven.

Description

A winged Victory, in flowing purple robes and holding a laurel wreath, hovers above a Hero, who drives his chariot directly towards us. He is a young man, strong and determined, with short, curly, red hair and no beard. He is dressed in full armor (bronze breastplate over a short, red tunic, and bronze greaves), and wears a helmet with a tall, horse-hair crest. The charioteer stands, holding a hasta (long spear) upright in his right hand and the reins in his left. A dog or wolf sits in the chariot in front of the charioteer's right leg, and to the his left is an ancile, a large Bronze Age "figure 8" shield. On the shield is a special form of the sign for Mars: an apple surmounted by a spread-winged Victory.

The chariot is pulled by two horses, red roan on its right, blue roan on its left, each pulling toward its own side. Lush green vegetation grows in the foreground in front of the chariot.

The chariot has two reddish-bronze wheels of eight spokes (four thick and four thin), and we can see the ends of the axle connecting them. Four posts, colored red, blue, green and yellow (chariot's front-right, front-left, back-left, back-right, respectively), support a midnight-blue canopy decorated with the seven stars of the Wain (Big Dipper) in silver; the Pointers (Merak and Dubhe) are directed to the front of the chariot. The front of the red chariot box is richly decorated with golden oak leaves, laurel leaves, figs, horses, wolves and woodpeckers. In the center a serpent curls around the rim of a round, bronze shield with the astrological sign for Aries in the center.

Verse

The Hero crowned by Victory drives the car Of triumph, seeking still to venture far, Accepting every challenge. He commands, And masters mighty steeds with skillful hands. Our vision's dazzled by the Hero's star!

Interpretation

The Chariot is the vehicle of the Hero, both to sally forth on new adventures, and to celebrate his triumphant return. Mobile yet secure, it is the means by which he accomplishes his daring deeds.

The characteristics of the Hero - courage, competitiveness, aggressiveness, strength, will - are potent instruments of good and ill, and he may bring salvation or destruction. But, however great his deeds, he will not be welcomed home with a Triumph nor be celebrated as a Hero unless his victory is more than personal, unless it is a victory for the people. In this he is guided by the seven stars above him, his destiny, which is the Wain (i.e., the Wagon), the way to the center around which the heavens revolve.

It is especially important that the Hero master and control the raw animal energy of his horses - physical and spiritual - which pull in different directions. For this he needs a strong, steady hand on the twin reins of will and intelligence, without which he will not have a steady vehicle from which to wield his spear and slay whatever dragons he encounters.

The wolf reminds us that the Hero may be ruthless, as does the Bronze Age shield. Made from a bronze plate over seven layers of tough oxhide, the shield also warns us that the Hero may shield himself from human compassion, hiding his face behind layers of protection. Though this shield covers the entire person, it is too great a burden, and it is eventually abandoned for the smaller, round shield, balanced in all directions, which must be maneuvered skillfully to parry blows.

On the other hand, the lush vegetation reminds us that the Hero's vitality is the force of life itself, striving to preserve and propagate itself and its kind, for Mars also fortifies and protects domesticated plants and animals. We may call Mars the God of Marches, for each new campaign must begin with a march and each spring season begins in March.

Commentary

The Triumphal Chariot represents the vehicle for the entire Major Arcana, for it is the centerpiece of the Roman and Renaissance triumph; it is a central feature of Petrarch's *Trionfi* and in the art it inspired (Moakley 76). As will

be explained in more detail below, it is also the triumphal vehicle in a more abstract sense, since it represents the relation of the body and the psyche. It provides a combination of mobility, security and stability (Case 93-5; Nichols 141-2).

The archaic ancile (figure-of-8 shield) is a symbol of grandeur and security. According to legend, the first ancile fell from heaven on March 1 (Mars' birthday) in the reign of King Numa (715-673 BCE). It was taken to be a sign from Mars of the future glory of Rome, and was considered essential to the safety of the state. Therefore, eleven copies were made and the twelve ancilia were kept together in the sacrum Martis (sacristy of Mars). At the beginning and end of the war season (Mar.-Oct.) the twelve Salii (Dancers), the priests responsible for these relics, took out the ancilia and sacred spears of Mars, and clashed them together (spear in right hand, shield on left arm) in a sacred procession and dance of victory. (OCD s.vv. Mars, Salii; Larousse 202-3; Oswalt 180-1)

For description of the figure-8 shield and its later abandonment, see Taylor (137-8), Guhl & Koner (237-8), and Nilsson (142-50); it is estimated to have weighed 40 pounds (Autenrieth s.v. aspis). Homer calls the smaller, round shield "well-balanced on every side" (pantos' eise, Il. III.347) and "well-rounded" (eukuklos, Il. V.453, 797). The snake on this well-rounded, balanced shield is the Nous (Mind) Serpent; it leads the chariot wherever it goes (Jung, MC 205).

The apple is a symbol for the cosmos, and when held by an emperor it represents his sovereignty over the world. In classical times the imperial apple was often surmounted by a Victory, thus representing victory over the world; in Christian times the pagan goddess was replaced by a cross, thus yielding the familiar orb and cross. (Biedermann 17) In alchemy the cross-over-circle is often taken to mean Earth, but Burckhardt (78-81) argues that it was the original symbol for Mars, in which case the signs for Mars and Venus are inversions of each other (which is appropriate for this couple; see below).

In our image, the overly defensive Bronze Age shield bears the sign of Mars, with its violent connotations, whereas the "well-rounded" shield on the chariot bears the sign of the more pastoral Aries (concerning which, see below).

The green vegetation reminds us the Mars was originally a god of vegetation, fertility and new vitality (Nichols 143). He is especially

associated with the efflorescence of spring, and is responsible for the well-being and protection of domestic plants and animals. Mars was originally equivalent to Silvanus, the spirit of the wilderness, and Rhea Silvia was his wife, who bore him Romulus and Remus. (Larousse 202) A common epithet of Mars was gradivus, which refers to his fostering of growth (grandiri, to grow). In later times gradivus was taken to refer to marching (gradi, to march), and so he is gradivus in two ways: an agricultural deity and a martial deity. (Larousse 202) I've tried to translate this pun by calling Mars "the God of Marches" and "the March God," simultaneously referring to the month and the action.

The charioteer holds the spear in his right hand, indicating that is the instrument of his conscious action; the reins are in his left hand because he has internalized (made unconscious) his ability to govern his drives and actions. The two reins represent intelligence and will (Cooper s.v. chariot), and the corresponding horses represent physical energy (red roan) and spiritual energy (blue roan) (Nichols 141). The white hairs in the roans' coats remind us that intelligence and will should be tempered by pure intentions, for without the intermixed white the horses' coats would be brown and black. (We see the red and blue horses in the Marseilles tarot, and many esoteric tarots have the chariot pulled by creatures of contrasting color.)

The charioteer is the ego-transcending guiding force that must govern the spirit (the horses) that move the chariot (the body) (Cooper s.v. chariot; Nichols 140, 143-4). To succeed in this he must balance the forces, which he accomplishes with the aid of Harmonia, his daughter (Biedermann s.v. chariot; Nichols 150). The metaphor is familiar, of course, from Plato's Phaedrus (246ff, 253ff) and other ancient texts.

To achieve a true victory, the charioteer must ensure that mind and body work together; he must harmonize (harmozein, join) the spiritual and physical. This is symbolized by the wheels of the chariot, which are heaven and earth, and the axle between them, which is the cosmic axis (Cooper s.v. chariot). The wheels have eight spokes because "the double quaternity or ogdoad stands for a totality, for something that is at once heavenly and earthly, spiritual or corporeal..." (Jung, MC 11). The same image appears in shamanism, where the World Tree, which connects heaven and earth, has eight branches, associated with eight great gods (Jung, Phil. Tree 305). The left-hand wheel is heaven, the spiritual plane; its four large spokes are the quarters of heaven, and the four small spokes are the quarters of earth as reflected in the heavens. Conversely, the right-hand wheel is earth, the

physical plane; its four large spokes are the quarters of earth, and its four small spokes are the quarters of heaven as reflected on earth. The rotations of one wheel mirror the rotations of the other, so the wheels and axle embody the Hermetic maxim, "as above, so below; as below, so above." (Neo-Pagans will be reminded of the eightfold wheel of the year.)

Eight, of course, is also the number of the Chariot in our sequence and in the Ferrara sequence. Its Pythagorean interpretation is balance, completeness, heaven and earth, the four elements of the body governed by the fourfold soul, cosmic law and natural rhythm. On the other hand, the numerical value of ARHS OBRIMOS (Ares Obrimos, Mighty Ares) is 801, which reduces to $1-0+8 = 9$ in the Hendecad. Therefore, the Chariot has the character of the Ennead, which the Pythagoreans say is perfect and unsurpassable, but incomplete. (See our interpretation of the Eights and Nines in the Minor Arcana)

The danger facing the Hero is hubris, usually translated "overweening pride." If his ego inflates and becomes invested with the trappings of victory, then his negative qualities will come forward, and the seeds of defeat will have been sowed (cf. Nichols 144-6). Then he will be like Ares, "hated by gods and mortals," the embodiment of unrefined brute strength and blind violence, obstinate and eager for strife, yet not nearly so successful as the more prudent Athena (his dual; see next) (Larousse 124-5; Sharman-Burke & Greene 39-41). However, true victory is possible if Mars is accompanied, as he often is, by Honos (Honor) and Virtus (Virtue) (Larousse 202).

The common modern tarot sequence makes the Chariot trump 7, which number is traditionally associated with victory, fate, destiny and transformation (Cooper 94; Nichols 143). This generally agrees with the Pythagorean interpretation, which also supports the trump 8 = Justice of the modern sequence (see my interpretation of the Sevens and Eights of the Minor Arcana). Furthermore, Chariot (Ares) and Justice (Athena) form a natural pair (blind violence versus cool, intelligent courage): (1) they were both war gods and often in conflict with each other, and (2) Ares was born by Hera without benefit of a father because she was angry at Zeus for bearing Athena without benefit of a mother (Larousse 125; Oswald 181). (Note that "Hera" is a feminine form of Greek "Heros" - OCD s.v. Hera, Hero-cult)

The four posts of the chariot represent the four elements (Case 95); their colors are archetypal (Jung, P&A 164-70); in the manuscripts of Ramon

Lull: yellow (or brown) = earth, green = water, blue = air, red = fire (Lull v. I, pll. XII, XIII; see also Cooper 60). Alternately, the elements can be symbolized by the colors of the alchemical opus: earth = black (nigredo), water = white (albedo), air = red (rubedo), fire = yellow (citrinitas) (Jung, MC 287). The Hero, standing in the middle of the four elemental posts, is a symbol of the Quintessence, the arcane substance which governs the others, the Anima Mundi (World Soul) (Nichols 140; Jung, MC 207).

The four pillars also correspond to the four temperaments in a standard way: brown/yellow (resp. nigredo) = melancholic, green (resp. albedo) = phlegmatic, blue (resp. rubedo) = sanguine, red (resp. citrinitas) = choleric. The red and blue pillars are in front (like the red and blue horses), since they are characteristic of the Hero and lead him, for the choleric temperament is irritable and inclined to fight, and the sanguine temperament is active, outward focused and successful. Trailing behind are the (lazy or peace-loving) phlegmatic nature and the (unsuccessful or thoughtful) melancholic nature. (Biedermann 114; Cooper 60; Jung, MC 287; Yates, OPEA 51)

By way of the elements, the posts also represent the four functions of the psyche (intuition, sensation, thought, feeling) (Nichols 141; Jung, MC 205). Though the exact correspondence is uncertain, Hamaker-Zondag (20) has intuition = fire, thinking = air, feeling = water, sensation = earth. The serpent is a traditional symbol of wisdom, and so we often find a Nous (Mind) serpent either pulling the chariot or riding in it (Jung, MC 205, 207), that is, guiding the four functions of the psyche and the four elements of the body. The charioteer guiding the chariot becomes a symbol for the spirit guiding the body (Jung, MC 208-9).

The Chariot is a symbol of the outward journey toward "individuation," that is, toward the fully integrated self (Nichols 139, 149). In this journey he is guided by the starry canopy above, in particular, by the Great Bear, which is also known as the Wain, that is, the Wagon, which is equivalent to the Chariot. The Wain points to the Pole, which represents the fixed self around which all psychic processes revolve. (Jung, MC 205) The Wain was also known as the Septem Triones (Seven Plough-Oxen), which connects it to trump 7, the Chariot in most modern tarots (Simon 26). The number 7 symbolizes fate and destiny (Nichols 143).

VI. Love (Aphrodite) precedes the Chariot (Ares) in the contemporary sequence, which reflects the well-known liaison of these gods, who correspond to the primary forces of Empedocles, Love (Philotes) and Strife

(Neikos). Aphrodite and Ares are sometimes shown as a wedded couple sharing a chariot (OCD s.v. Ares); their offspring was Harmonia, who reconciles her parents (cf. VII.Temperance, between VI.Love and VIII.Strife in the Ferrara sequence).

Similarly, in the sequence of alchemical procedures, the Regimen Martis (R. of Mars) follows the Regimen Veneris (R. of Venus), and so the purple of Venus (see VI.Love) is followed by varied colors, but especially blue. (Jung, MC 289).

Of course, Nike crowning the charioteer at the moment of victory was a common motif in ancient times; she presides over victories of all sorts: in war, athletics, beauty, the crafts, and even over death. She is an imposing goddess, for she forms a quaternity with her sister Bia (Force) and her brothers Zelos (Zeal or Rivalry) and Kratos (Strength or Power). (OCD s.v. Nike) Her robes are purple to symbolize the pomp of the triumph, pride, the just victory and imperial power (Cooper s.v. colours). Of course, Victoria is closely associated with Mars (OCD s.v. Victoria).

The color red dominates our image for manifold reasons. In general terms it is the color of physical energy, blood, vitality and fire. It is the color of war gods, and specifically of Mars, the red planet. It is also the color of the sign Aries. (Cooper s.v. colours)

Common attributes of Ares include bronze armor, including a tall-crested helmet, and a spear. Animals connected with him include the woodpecker, wolf, dog and horse; plants include the bean, oak, dogwood and laurel. The ancile (figure-8 shield) has been discussed already. (Larousse 124-5, 202) Ares is often shown driving a chariot drawn by four horses, named Aithon (Red Fire), Phlogos (Flame), Conabos (Tumult) and Phobos (Terror); they may be taken to correspond to the four elements (Cooper s.v. chariot; Larousse 125; Oswald 38) There are two horses in our image, since that is more appropriate to the interpretation and the elements are represented by the chariot posts.

In Petrarch's "Africa" and Albricus' "Allegoriae Poeticae" Mars comes, furious, full-bearded, in his blood-stained, three-horse chariot; he is in full armor, a shining helmet upon his head, a three-roped flail in his left hand. On his left, the cock crows on a block, and a wolf runs beside him, carrying the child in its mouth. The screaming Furies follow close behind.

On the Mars card in the Mantegna Tarocchi, Mars faces us, seated in a

chariot with two pillars; a dog rests in front of his right foot. No horses are visible. Mars wears full armor and a winged helmet, and holds a sword upright in his right hand, his left resting at his waist. (Kaplan 40)

On Etruscan mirrors Maris (Mars) sits naked, on a cloak (or with it draped over his left shoulder), beardless or not, with short hair with a garland, or longish and curled; he holds a long (2.2 m.) staff or lance in his right (or left) hand, and leans on stick in his left hand. He may wear high boots and a Phrygian helmet. (van der Meer 116)

Both the Bergamo Visconti-Sforza and the Cary-Yale Visconti tarot decks are unusual in showing a woman in the chariot, which is drawn across the card by two white horses (winged, in the Visconti-Sforza case).

Many modern authors associate the Chariot with the sign Cancer, but I don't see a compelling reason for this. Kaplan (4-5) displays seven different tables of astrological correspondences for the Major Arcana; in particular, the Chariot has been associated with Gemini, Mars, the Sun, Venus, Libra and Cancer. I believe that the Chariot, like Mars, corresponds to Aries. First, Mars is the planet that rules Aries, and Mars displays the characteristics attributed to Aries. Second, Mars is intimately connected with the vernal equinox and the efflorescence of nature; he gave his name to March, which was the first month of the pre-Julian Roman calendar. His birthday was celebrated on the first of March, and he had important festivals throughout the month. March initiated the war season, and the traditional iconography of March is filled with symbols of Mars. (de Mailly Nesle 130-1; OCD s.v. Mars; Oswalt 180; Salzman 106-11)

Livy (Ad urbe cond. XXX.30) said: "Melior tutiorque est certa pax quam sperata victoria; haec in tua, illa in deorum manu est" (Better and safer is an assured peace than a victory hoped for; the one is in your own power, the other is in the hands of the gods).

Shani-Der..marvelous in Egyptian, belongs to God in Armenian..

Gustav has followed the orders of Marcus and Kermes Twa in burning what is left of Nancy and Adrian's past in America and they leave for France and DuMond House.

Marcus's mother holds the key to how to dispose of Sheridan

Marcus delivers Nancy's twins..Adrian Joseph, and Desiree' Bethanie, while Adrian has gone to protect his family and home, knowing Marcus's mother's secrets to disposing of the evil that Sheridan and Hella Dracon have perpetrated upon her family. All of her papers are hidden in the chapel area, among other things.

Desiree' didn't seem the least bit upset at our dire circumstances, but reacted in her own peculiar way. " I always wanted to see what was behind this closed door, and now's our chance, Nancy. "

Bethanie chimed in.." Doesn't the Bible say, ' Seek and ye shall find? ' " I was outnumbered and let them have free reign. Underneath a pile of dusty boxes that contained hats, gloves and dresses was a trunk containing books and papers that belonged to Marcus's mother. " You know what we're going to do, don't you Desiree'? "

" Yes, Sister..seeing as we don't have much time before Valera and Dr. Franco return, we'll put all the papers and books we find in our trunk and look through them at our leisure..I'm sure Marcus won't mind as he won't know! "

Lorraine's gift came when she was pregnant with Adrian, and most of her thoughts seemed to focus on the DuMond House where he was concerned.

I looked down on them through my portrait's eyes and Sheridan spoke.
" The Great Goddess Hella Dracon has made her ruling and we cannot argue with her wishes. "

" That wasn't the voice of Hella Dracon, but that of Kermes Twa, who brings about light from darkness, innocence from guilt, and life from death. "
Desiree' breathed a prayer of thanks that the true Great Goddess had saved her soul.

He was more than horrified as he remembered he still had Sheridan's scarf in his possession, and that he'd used it on Nancy when they made love..that's when he knew that Sheridan would stop at nothing to kill anyone who got in the way of her being with Marcus.

" Marcus left and I have no ideas as to where he is or what he's doing now. "

Valera sighed.

" I love you, Adrian, " but deep within the secret reaches of my heart and soul I whispered, " I love you, Marcus. "

I was going to unlock the door, but it opened and there stood Marcus, a bemused grin on his face as if he knew everything I'd come in search of. He closed the door and before I could protest, his lips captured mine, and although I wanted to resist, it was futile as my love for him came to the forefront.

" As soon as my business with Sheridan is finished, your complete pleasure will belong to me exclusively again. "

He turned on his heel and disappeared as Adrian came up behind me and kissed my neck.

Reading Desiree's journal, it seems as if Marcus's mother also desecrated one of Hella Dracon's holy temples and paid sorely with her life on the very day of Marcus's birth. Phillipe's mother and father had not been able to conceive, but were promised a son if they joined Hella Dracon's religious order and he would become a holy priest, but Phillipe wanted nothing to do with their evil religion, so he ran off to sea.

Desiree' spoke privately to Bethanie and me. " There's more to this story than meets our eyes. What Sher imparted to Bethanie is still true..the Great Goddess has imparted many things to me since my spirit was reborn in Nancy. She's just biding her time until our baby is born, and then she plans to offer all of us as living sacrifices to Hella Dracon..she's always known about your mother and her ancestors, Adrian, but you weren't high on her priority list until you came into our lives..she knows if the baby is allowed to live, her own life will be at stake, as she will not have fulfilled her obligation to the evil goddess she and her monks follow..and of course she never

thought you or Nancy would find out the truth of who you truly are. Once there's no chance of futhering your lineage, Sher will be sole high priestess and will be able to have Marcus for her soul possession.

The judge who marries them is the same judge who took care of Nancy's parents legal matters when they came to Springfield.

Sher finds out about Marcus's baby and Adrian is the one who ends up killing her, piercing her heart with Desiree's crystal pendant which has the last drop of her innocent blood, and he dies in the process.

Marcus and Dr. FRanco have had their own private sessions and Marcus discovers what Sher is from Father Quimpers and Pierre Franco's papers that he's had time to read and absorb..Sher had Dr. Franco use the special red and black scarf that had some of Marcus's blood on it to hypnotize, then make him forget his actions. He writes a long letter to Nancy, explaining and asking for Desiree's forgiveness and that he'll get his revenge on Sher for what she did to everyone. BEthanie will have to use her acting skills to convince Sher that Nancy and Marcus have had a falling out about the baby as it belongs to Adrian and not Marcus..Dr. FRanco confirms that fact. Nancy leaves Castle Desiree' to complete the act and moves in with Arian and Angelo..Nancy learns more about Adrian's family as well as her own from the lawyer who handled her parents' last will and testament. Nancy has inherited Annelle's house in France and she, Adrian, Angelo, and Dr. Franco go there in search of answers, while Valera and Gustav stay with Marcus in order to help him trap Sher.

Marcus leaves in search of Sheridan and tells Valera and Gustave to take good care of Nancy till he returns..more of Father Quimper's papers are read, as well as Dr. Franco's papers..Nancy gets tired of waiting for Marcus and she and Adrain head for her home in France to learn more about their families.

Tuesday, June 30th 1877...on Sunday, May 31st Raven Joshua Aleanse was born, named for both our fathers...he has Reven's eyes and nose, and my mouth..there are even signs of my family's birthmark on his wrist. It will be another 18 months before my husband and father return from their most recent trip aboard Goddess of the Sea. Raven is my bundle of joy and is very active..and always hungry.

Saturday, April 15, 1879..on Thursday, December 23, 1878 I received an early Christmas surprise..Reven and Father came through the door, and my life was whole again. Reven and I have spent the last 4 months getting ready to move to America..Father bought Uncle Richard's shipping business as he has fallen ill, and Reven is taking over the American end in San Francisco. Reven has already bought and furnished a house for us near the Pacific Ocean..I know I'll miss everything here in Nancy, but am looking forward to new beginnings.

I've not written in my diary for quite some time as the business of life has taken over..between raising Raven and taking care of the house and servants and being the perfect hostess for many gatherings and parties, life has been happy and most fulfilling until that fateful Thursday, February 2nd, 1880..a terrible storm has raged across the Bay and many lost their lives, among them my Cousin Bethanie and her husband, Phillip Conner..Reven and I were the ones who found their bodies washed up on shore, not far from our house. I recognised Bethanie right away, but was more than surprised to find that Phillip worked as a naval architect for my father's company..all I had ever heard about Bethanie was that she ran away from her engagement party to Marcus Canossa and was never heard from again. Reven had no idea she was my cousin as they'd kept to themselves. Reven contacted the local authorities and put us in touch with the lawyers who handled their estate..they had left everything to their young son, Phillip, and considering I was his closest living relative, Reven and I were given sole legal authority to raise and adopt Phillip as our own son..although I was sad about the circumstances, I was more than happy to have him as I could never have any more babies of my own.

We were surprised, but Bethanie most of all." To think we were in San Francisco at the same time and our paths never crossed, but in knowing she raised our Phillip makes my heart glad. "

' God in his eternal wisdom always supplies our needs.'

The Great Goddess in all her own wisdom prompted me to interrupt..Valera didn't blink an eye. " How were Marcus's needs met? "

He furrowed his eyebrows in concentration as Valera began to speak.

Annelle tells about her life and Bethanie's death and raising Bethanie's son, Phillip. Valera tells about her side of the story and how she and Gustav came to stay on as permanent helpers to Marcus.

Dr. Franco tells what occurred with her ancestor..Dr. Franco brings out her papers and confronts Marcus with the truth of his actions against Desiree'..she hypnotises him and he remembers exactly what he did..he leaves in a rage to find Sheridan and Nancy goes to Dumond House to trace her past.

Roundtable discussion with everyone and Dr. FRanco gives each a copy of all the papers..everyone has a chance to remember the events..Dr. FRanco knows the key word to hypnotize Desiree' and Marcus, one at a time while the other listens in to events.

DNA from a locket of hair that Dr. Franco had and kept from the baby she found..she left for France and when she came back a fire had occurred in the old orphanage and they had no records of where the baby had been transferred to.

Dr. Franco has her own set of papers, including what happened to Marcus and Sheridan.

He had certain of their personal possessions stored along with his papers and I've managed to do DNA tests on them and make perfect match comparisons.

Dr. Franco brings out her papers and confronts Marcus with the truth of his

actions against Desiree'..she hypnotises him and he remembers exactly what he did..he leaves in a rage to find Sheridan and Nancy goes to Dumond House to trace her past.

"Nancy, I know there's much you don't understand about their circumstances, but Marcus and Desiree' are the ones who need to understand the other's motives and that will happen soon.

Things click in Dr. Franco's mind when she sees Nancy's birthmark. Desiree' and Marcus find out about her mother through Bethanie's papers..she was put in an institution and slowly died of guilt and heartbreak. Bethanie hated Desiree' because she thought Desiree' caused their mother's death.

Do Adrian and Nancy make love while they're under the influence of Phillippe and Bethanie? Is Adrian the father of one twin and Marcus the father of the other?

Are used to color and flavor a French liqueur, Parfait Amour

Bethanie sees Phillippe at Desiree's gravesite in August and she wonders who he is..and follows him..she falls in love with him and he with her. They begin meeting at midnight in the apple orchard until winter sets in and they meet in NYC and make love.

Adrian, Angelo, and Mark join the search party, and they're invited to stay as a late winter storm envelopes the region. Annelle has all of Bethanie's and Phillippe's papers telling how they met..inside of her trunk and tells of what hapened to them in her lifetime, while Mark has his mother's papers..Nancy traces back her lineage after the dna test confirms who she really is and then finds out she's pregnant

Phillippe and Bethanie die on an outing when the baby is 2 years old..Reven

finds their bodies and he and Annelle take the baby and raise it as their own,,he keeps his own name

Only when Marcus reads Bethanie's diary does he learn the real truth about her hatred and her actions against Desiree' . Mark find Dr. Franco's papers in his Mother's papers..he finds newspaper clippings of the accident..Mark's mother was the nurse who found Nancy and placed her in the orphanage..couldn't find any living relatives..are he and Nancy related somehow???

Sher had Nancy's parents killed because she found out that her mother was blood related to Annelle..forehand knowledge from the coven that their baby would be the cause of her demise..she thought the baby had died also but she was found and given to the orphanage.

After Sher's demise..she goes back to Fredericksburg before she's found out..after Kermes Twa revokes her powers, and she dies under mysterious circumstances..Nancy must make a choice..whether to use the last drop of Desiree's innocent blood for herself or to let Adrian use it and go back to being human again.

After Marcus realizes what he did to Desiree', he goes off in an emotional upheaval to find and kill Sheridan and the evil monks..and to heal his heart and soul..Nancy goes to Rance to learn of her roots and family and gives birth to twins..a blond girl who bears the DuMond family bithmark and a black-haired boy who looks and acts like Marcus.

A Vampire is allowed one chance to change..if an ' Innocent ' offers themselves completely of their own free will.. their body, soul, mind and blood, then the Vampire can be transformed back into the person they were before they were ' TURNED ' . " When Adrian does this, she and Desiree' become human again, but what of the babies?

I finally smiled. " What kind of dreams did you have, Adrian? "

" I dreamed we met on a clipper ship, but I've never sailed on the ocean before. " A faint tingling rushed through my veins.

" Adrian, although I only caught a glimpse of your handkerchief, it was most unique. "

He showed me the whole picture embroidered on the white background. " This belonged to my mother, and was handed down through her side of the family for generations. Poseidon is god of the sea and of mariners and depending on his mood, he would send fair or foul weather. " The god hovered in the heavens, looking down on a split picture of the same ship..one under blue sky and sunshine, the other under the black clouds and lightning of a raging storm. " He stared intently at me. " I am told that some of my forebears were sailors on the sea. "

" Saltwater running through your arteries? I have no idea what's flowing in my bloodstream. " I sighed.